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MAY
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Western Trails

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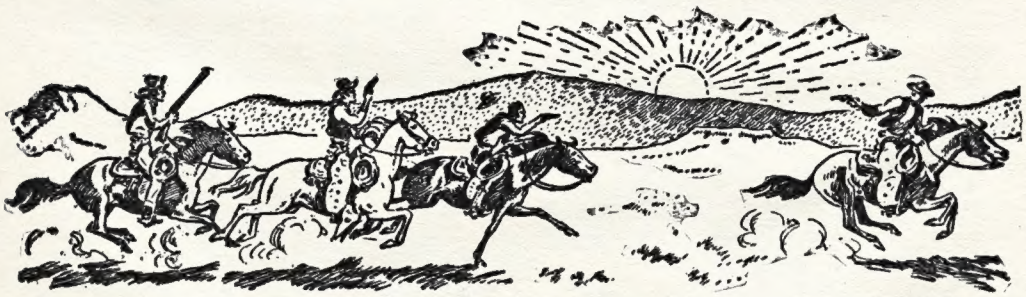

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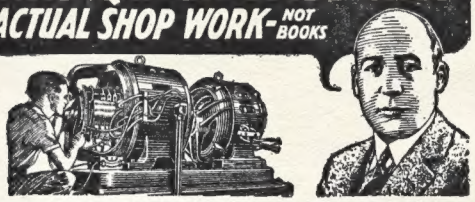

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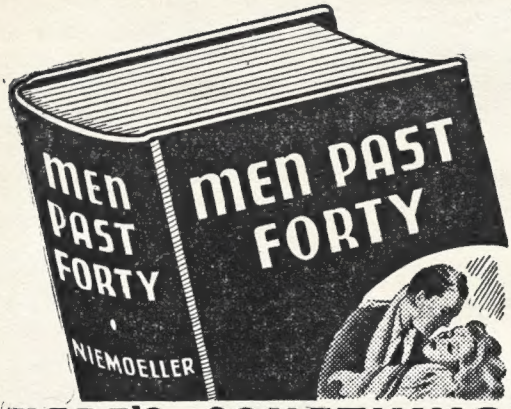

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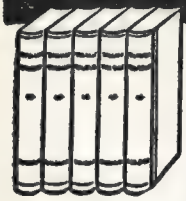

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29x5.25-19	2.45	1.15
30x5.25-20	2.50	1.15
31x5.25-21	2.60	1.15
5.50-17	2.75	1.15
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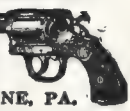

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The blast of the Colt echoed the roar of the shotgun.

CHAPTER I

TRIGGER TRIBUTE

A LAST faintly violet flash of lightning shimmered down Amarillo way. And after a long stillness the rumble of the distant thunder rolled flatly along the land. Jed Steele brought his big red roan to a stop in the soggy trail.

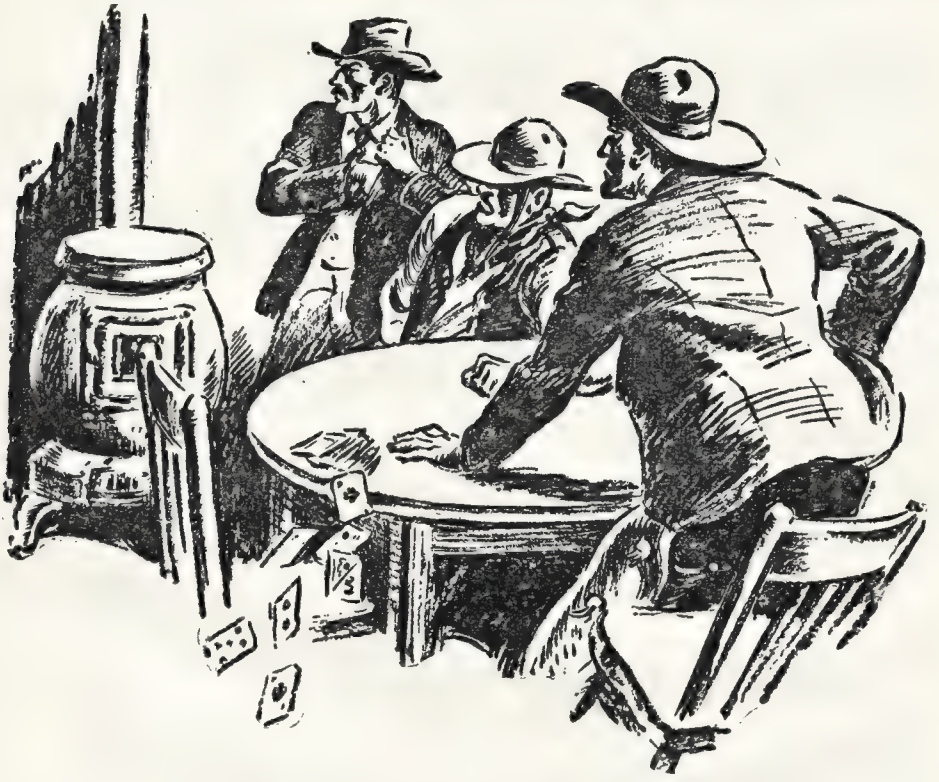
He sat like that awhile, letting his thoughts go dribbling off into the quick-shutting darkness of the Panhandle night. Then because the things that were in his mind were too much for his silence, he spoke gently to the horse, setting his gaze on the hard-pricked ears.

"Thar's a good nip in the air now, Fury. I'm figgerin' mebbe the fust snow what sticks on the ground will be puttin' a stop to this yere rustlin' o' my beef."

He started to get out of his slicker, cold and damp with the recent rain. But then he stopped and his voice blurred with a sort of embarrassment, for Jed Steele hated to lie even to his horse. "An' mebbe I'm jest pluggin' a hole in my hat with that talk. Like when I makes believe I enjoy bein' on this durn forsaken

on the Panhandle

When left-handed law flung Jed Steele out on the danger trail, he knew that it took a lot of fire to temper what's best in a man. Yet even though Steele had never flinched from any man's gun, he had never bucked anything like the mad blood-lust of the Rock Creek renegades.



Novel of Cow-Country Courage

By Andor de Soos

ranch, when all the time I got me a hunger most the size o' Texas to be talkin' to a woman o' my own."

He tugged his arm away from the sleeve, thinking again of what he had first said, figuring that this winter would be like the last, with no cover of snow on the ground to lead him to the rustlers who had taken three-fourths of his herd. It made a burn-

ing deep inside him, for Jed Steele, whom everyone thought of as a quiet-loving man, had a core of rage in his lean strong body he kept to himself.

Jed Steele kept to himself in other ways, too, with a lonely man's knowing of loneliness. So that the few people he spoke to when he went to Amarillo to make his purchases would look into his eyes and find them pleasant and wide-set, honest brown eyes that were a little wistful. And only the sharp stars and the bleak storm-wracks of the Panhandle night knew his rage, when his eyes became cold bright stones and his lips hurled an angry challenge to the Fates that never found an echo.

Not until that late fall night when he rode out the storm and stopped to take off his slicker. Then as he turned to strap it behind the saddle, Jed looked up toward the Chaparral Hills and saw there the answer to his long waiting. It was just a faint ruddy glow burnishing a slow-rising column of smoke lifting out of a flat draw just beyond the nearest dark hill. Jed figured it might be the campfire of one of the Lazy Dee riders, for Dave Means' big ranch ran its line just beyond the Chaparrals.

But he had waited long, and in the waiting his nerves and senses had become sharp as the raw edge of the hill against the thin glow beyond it. So that when he urged Fury off the trail his raw-boned body was alert. His hand felt the quick raw bite of the night air when he pulled off his glove, and he worked his fingers with the palm of his hand resting on the smooth wood of the Colt's butt.

He got out of the saddle soundlessly when he reached the bottom of the slope and left Fury there, short-hobbled with a twist in the reins. Then as he started around the hill his eyes changed color. They became hard twin agates, with a little core of heat burning in the heart of each. Jed Steele had searched long to find his answer, and now that it was before him he knew he would have no questions to ask.

THE slope went easing off into the night before him, and his cautious feet followed the feel of it, leading him into the slow curve of the draw. Then the blunt shoulder of the hill fell away to the gravel bottom, with the darkness holding a belly of red glow beyond it. Jed slipped his gun and moved around into the shallow pocket. He was only a gray shadow against the black hill, and the call of a coyote from a far knoll might have been his own voice saying: "You hombres come up easy—"

Then there was no more to be said with words. The two figures hunkered near the flames jerked around and the dull struggling shape that was between them rose from the ground with a quick bleat. Jed knew by instinct that the yearling was one of his herd, and the way it scampered off toward his own range proved him right.

But that thought was so fleeting it barely pressed against his brain, for Jed had other things to notice. Like the red light of the fire glinting dully on a badge pinned to the jacket of the man beyond the flames, whose hand went fumbling under his jacket—and the light slanting along the barrel of a Colt in the hand of the man nearer him.

Jed muttered: "All right, have it yore way," and his finger squeezed on the curved trigger. The hard bucking of the gun in his hand drew a vicious stab of light from the gun held by the man on the near side of the fire. Jed felt the cold blast as death whined past his head. Now the man with the badge had a roaring gun in his hand and two fast-flung chunks of lead pushed into the soft earth beyond Jed.

Then the dull thud of the nearer man falling in a stiff line was lost in the roar of Jed's Colt. He could see the way something happened to the

other's bright badge, for now it was redder than it had been with the firelight on it. So Jed held in his rage that was the desire to squeeze the trigger again. As he watched the gun slip from the hand of the man with the red badge, he saw him stumble awkwardly and roll on his side near the fire, with his jacket smoldering from the heat.

For a long minute Jed Steele stood his ground, the gun slanting aside but ready. He realized that he had hardly drawn breath since he came around the shoulder of the hill, and when he let the air shudder from his lungs it made him cough nervously. So he turned on his heel, going around the hill and down through the draw toward the slope where he had left Fury.

Jed had slipped his gun back into the holster after reloading, and was striding leather, turning Fury back toward the trail, when a rush of riders sounded in the night. He thought of swinging Fury up over the slope, knowing he could trust the roan to race away from any Panhandle pursuit. But then a voice came trouble-sharp across the flat grass-range, shouting: "Who's ridin' thar?"

And when Jed knew it was Sheriff Abe Milburn he reined in, answering: "Jed Steele, sheriff," and waited like that until three riders came out of the darkness and surged close.

He had no worry about the sheriff and opened his mouth to speak a greeting. But then his jaws clamped shut and he stiffened, knowing one of the others as Dave Means, the boss of the Lazy Dee. And when the third man swung in close Jed recognized Steve Cole, the Lazy Dee ramrod. Now instinct warned him again, making him wonder why these three should be night-riding the range.

The sheriff asked: "Thought I heerd some shootin'?"

"Bagged me a couple of coyotes in yonder draw," Jed cautiously said, and let it go at that.

DAVE MEANS cleared his throat, leaning from the saddle to spit into the ground, and when he came up straight he said: "Looks like thar's a campfire still blazin' thataway. A man ought to kick his flames apart afore he leaves, especial when he's off his own range."

Jed pretended he was thinking that over, but his mind just went blank, trusting more to the feel of things. And when he felt the thin prickling at the back of his neck he said: "Mebbe you better go take a look at the way o' things, sheriff."

Abe Milburn's too narrow face screwed up at that and the fingers of his left hand strayed up to touch the bright metal of the badge he wore. For the sheriff, who had the gusty flavor of a rooster when he strode the board walks of Amarillo, had sense enough not to crow his pride too wide. His eyes shifted aside, to the bulk of Dave Means that was bloated with good living and the thin viciousness of Steve Cole.

Then he half rose in the saddle, trying to add stature to his voice when he said: "Take the lead, Steele, an' show us what you mean."

A faintly cold smile tugged Jed's lips apart and he shook his head. "Guess I'll jest let you find the way, sheriff."

Milburn's chin lifted cockily, and he would have said harsh words, but he saw the way Jed Steele was watching him. Then the sheriff thought of how Jed might go gunning for him first if trouble started, and it made his guts knot with a cold spasm that slumped him back into the saddle.

His voice came as a croaking from his dry throat: "In the draw, huh? Wal, we'll go take a look-see."

Jed waited while the sheriff turned his horse along the slope, and waited some more until Dave Means saw he would have to move first.

Dave said: "Come along, Steve." There was a tinge of hardness edging his words, as if he knew what there was to be seen in the draw.

When Steve Cole put his horse to the tail of Dave's pony, Jed turned to follow them. As they were passing the shoulder of the hill Jed took off his right glove and crammed it under his belt, and hitched the holster a little forward on his thigh.

They rode into the draw that way, with Milburn in front and Jed riding slowly in the rear, holding Fury back a little. Then when the sheriff growled, "What the hell!" with his voice toning upward with surprise, Jed stopped his horse. His slitted eyes watched the three ahead of him put the spurs to their mounts, and surge up to the tiny fire where two still figures lay on the frosty ground.

Jed heard the vicious oath rip from the hard lips of Dave Means and saw the rancher jerk rigid. Then Sheriff Milburn went down from the saddle and for a while fussed around the two bodies.

When he climbed back into leather he turned and called: "How come, Steele? Talk up."

Jed let the sheriff's words drift through his brain, like slow water running over a flat rock, so that he understood the way things were, with Milburn willing to risk his neck to please Dave.

Jed said: "Caught 'em runnin' an iron on one o' my stock." And while he spoke he made his eyes drift around, locating Means and Cole, who were easing away. And because they were getting toward the edge of the circle of dull light from the fire he said: "Hold up, you hombres."

CHAPTER II

Cold-Deck Range

MEANS reined in and called out: "That war' my cousin you kilt, Jed Steele." And when Jed did not answer the rancher went on, speaking at the same time that the sheriff's angry yell drifted toward the hill. So Means was saying: "Thar' ain't no sign o' beef in the draw, nuther."

The sheriff said: "That other war' my deppity, Sam Perkins."

Jed knew then what was coming, and there was the tenseness in him that made him jerk a little when something brushed against his cheek. It was only the thin white drift of a snowflake bringing the winter to the range, but his movement had been quick and sharp. So that Milburn's voice saying: "Got to put you un'er arrest," was lost in the sudden hard bellow of Steve Cole's gun.

The shock of the lead ripping through the flesh of his left shoulder lifted Jed from the saddle and flung him hard against the pommel. But Fury's wild crawfish kept him in the leather, and when he came upright his Colt was lurid with flame. Then the butt kicked against his palm a second time and he saw the way Steve Cole went askew in the stirrups. Now two other guns were ripping aside the silence and behind him lead-crumbled loose shale drifted from the face of the cliff.

Jed muttered: "Dammit to hell, I got to!" and flung a shot toward Milburn. Seeing the way the sheriff urged away from the firelight, Jed dropped from the saddle and slapped Fury with the hot barrel of the Colt. He thought how Means and Milburn would now chase after his horse, but then there was the hard flash of Means' gun and the dull thud of lead tearing at the ground near him. So Jed moved back some more until he was flat against the sheer drop of the cliff.

Now there was quiet movement beyond the flames and Jed reloaded his gun while listening to small sounds.

The sheriff called out: "Come up to the fire, Steele, an' keep yore hands high!"

Jed grinned into the night, knowing the way Means wanted him in the light to cut him down.

He answered: "I bin weaned a long time agone, sheriff."

Jed set himself square on his heels, hearing the rapid thunder of hoofs

and seeing two rushing shapes coming out of the darkness. He waited for them to get near, with the blood pounding in him and his throat hot with anger. As the two horses swung abreast he dropped flat to the ground and pulled trigger, his shots droning out a long booming roll, and above him the whine of seeking lead.

He saw how one of the figures bounced up high from the saddle and came down swaying, clutching at the pommel, and heard the sharp clatter of a gun dropped on the frozen ground. Then both horses went out into the draw and he heard Milburn telling Dave Means to hang on, so that he knew he had hit the rancher. In a little while when he edged his cautious way past the shoulder of the hill, he could hear the slow rhythm of hoofs loping toward town.

As he strode along the slope of the range, Jed's spurs were a measure of his thoughts, ringing cold and metallic in the frosty silence. Now the snow was drifting down, slanting along the steady direction of a faint wind, and the ground under his feet was graying with the wintry pall. His first attempt at a whistle was a thin gust of air through cold lips. Then in answer to a second try the shape of Fury came through the white drift.

Jed swung into the saddle and headed the roan toward the place he called home. Now there was in him an urgency, knowing that Means and the sheriff would be bringing a posse before the dawn to gun-smoke him out of his shack. But the urgency could not make him move faster. For Jed Steele was filled with a bitter knowledge that he was riding his own range for the last time.

THE wind began to lift in long, surging notes, whirling the snow hard against his face. Jed dropped his chin until it rested against the top button of his closed jacket. He rode on like one asleep in the saddle, with his eyes closed against the bitter weather and holding the bitterness inside. He went on like that for some five miles, tasting the gall of his rage and feeling no cold because of the heat of his anger. When Fury at last came to a stop in the narrow yard before the small shack that was Jed Steele's spread, the rider jerked erect, looking about with wide, surprised eyes.

Then when he knew where he was, he put back his head and roared cruel laughter into the night. For that too was in the heart of Jed Steele—the laughter that could warp a light thread even through the woof of his troubles.

He spoke aloud, saying: "Mebbe I needed me some proddin' to keep me from settin' still the rest o' my life." He was voicing the urge of a restless spirit that had been seeking something beyond mere living, and had been chained too long to one range.

Jed hit the ground with both feet, barely conscious of the small twinge in his shoulder where the lead had seared through the living flesh. And when he went into his one-room shack there was a lift to his tread and a quick thought was lighting a glint behind his brown eyes.

"I'll jest fix things so the posse gits hung up here a spell," he muttered.

He moved about quickly, lighting a fire in the wood stove. There were but a few things to do—packing his saddle bags and blankets and his boot-holstered Winchester; taking the few silver dollars cached in a tin box behind the stove and dropping them into the slant pockets of his jeans; putting on more clothes to keep him warm on the coming long ride.

Only when he was done with those needed chores did he turn to glance about the room. For a moment his eyes clouded, for there had been a glad pride in the ownership of the

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little ranch. Then the pleasure of moving on again took hold of him. The bright glint of the thought he had when he first came into the shack again quickened in his dark eyes.

Urged on by the need of hurry, he took a paper box of shells and a spool of rough thread from a shelf. Fastening the thread to the box, he hung it above the opening in the stove and removed the lid. Then with a poker he knocked out a small pane of glass from the back window and dropped the spool through.

Leaving the room in the flickering half-light from the fire in the stove, Jed went outside and picked up the spool, then mounted to the saddle, moving slowly away from the house. Unraveling the thread, he rode into the lee of the small barn across the yard and out of the cutting wind.

JED tied the end of the thread to a nail sticking out from the boards of the barn and sat back in the saddle to wait. While a thin nervousness crept through him, he rolled a cigarette, cupping the glow in the palm of his hands. He had just crushed the last of it against the barn when he heard the far pounding of horses. A dry grin cracked across his cold face as he reached up and snapped the thread. Then he turned Fury out of the yard and loped away into the night.

A half mile from the shack a small ice-glazed waterhole lay at the foot of the slow-rising hills. Jed stopped the roan at the very edge of the rustle-dry grass and turned in the saddle, his eyes sharply scanning the trail left by Fury's hoofs. The snow that was a thick white haze hiding him from pursuit was fast at work covering the telltale track. Jed nodded, knowing that in five minutes the white earth blanket would efface the marks of his flight.

Fury's head snapped up with a sharp jerk and his ears strained like those of his rider as a dull echo moved flatly along the range. Jed grinned, thinking of the shells that had fallen into the hot stove, and he waited for another sound. It came in a crashing volley as the posse, circling the deserted shack, drove a murderous hail of lead into the thin board walls.

Jed turned Fury up the slope and rode on slowly, still hearing the harsh sounds of the firing. Near the top of the ridge was a scraggly stand of timber. For a while he rode between the dark ghosts of tree trunks wearing a robe of snow on the windward side. Then he moved clear of them into a wind-swept saddle-back. Now when he looked back he jerked Fury to a stand and sat the leather stiffly, staring at the grim red mockery of the flames below.

He thought of the wearisome toil that had created his little ranch and of Dave Means whose wide coveting had taken it from him. And yet he felt no anger, only a great surge of freedom as if earth shackles had been struck from him. Spurring Fury over the ridge, he moved out of the biting wind as they started down.

A heavier stand of pine crowded them into barred shadows where the snow drifted slowly, weighing the reaching branches with masses of white. Suddenly the gray clouds scurried aside and bright moonlight lay the flat sheen of silver in his path. Jed gulped deeply of the scented chill air and put back his head. Something he remembered made him lift a little straighter in the saddle. Then his laughter went out of him, hurrying into the dense forest, and his soft drawl followed, saying: "Sometimes it takes a lot o' fire to temper what's best in a man."

That was the thing he remembered, and it made him despise the years he had served the uneventful earth of his ranch. Now as he set his face and eyes and heart toward Indian Territory he even felt thankful, in some dim way, that Dave Means had struck the shackles from him and set his feet on dangerous trails.

CHAPTER III

Danger Trail

THAT long hard winter found Jed Steele moving ever north. At first he thought he would hole up in Cimarron, but in Taos he went into a saloon and when he lifted his glass his eyes fell on a crude poster tacked on the wall near the bar. That had made him laugh into his drink. He sensed the dry humor of it—the five hundred dollars reward for him, dead or alive.

So he jingled his remaining twelve dollars and stalked out of the saloon while men stared after him, wondering why a man drinking alone should laugh that way. And they heard him laugh again as he swung into the saddle and set Fury on the trail that took him north through Chama Pass.

The reward remained the same but his pockets held only eight dollars when he rode into Indian Territory. Yet Jed Steele thought no more of the reward than he did of his emptying pocket. In him the flame of adventure burned high, and Fury heard ever more often the deep carefree laughter of the rangy man in the saddle.

The last blizzard retreating across the land before the march of spring stung the snowflakes into Jed's face as he rode into a long and narrow north-border valley. In the late afternoon the snow thinned out as the wind dropped and Jed found a well-beaten trail. Dusk fell like the sifting of dark sand, the curtain of drifting snow a gray murk ahead of him.

Soon Jed saw dim squares of light deep in the valley. He felt a raw tenseness grip his nerves and willingly gave way to it, knowing it was a warning he could only sense but could not know. So that as he rode into the little crossroads town at the end of the trail his eyes were quick gimlets boring into the shadowy spaces beyond the lights.

To his right a rambling low building huddled against a high snowbank, a weather-beaten sign on a creaky chain swinging above the wide door that was half open. Jed turned his head aside, reading the faded lettering over the livery stable, and learned that he was in Wolf Lodge. But it meant nothing to him. One cowtown was much like any other, except that some were better because they had no reward poster stuck behind the bar.

Jed turned Fury toward the hitchrack across the street where the yellow light in the saloon filtered through the heat scum on two square windows. A long side-glance showed him there were two other buildings in Wolf Lodge. One was small and dark and sinister with the bleak dark hole of a barred window staring into the storm. The bigger one, Jed figured, would be the general store.

In front of its wide porch a team of grays hitched to a wagon stood blinking into the light. A half-bent old man came out of the store, lugging a heavy box of provisions, and hoisted it over the tailboard. Jed could see the breath laboring out of him in a long, white frost streamer.

THE light from the saloon cast the long restless pattern of Fury and four other horses on the snow back of the hitchrack. Jed lifted out of the saddle and made to get down, half turning in the stirrup as his foot touched the frozen ground. That brought him about so that for a moment he faced the partly open door of the livery stable. It made a long slit of light against the darkness, with the single lamp burning smokily halfway down the row of stalls.

Jed felt a spasm race along his spine and he stiffened, seeing a dark form sneak past the narrow edge of light. The figure turned at the corner into the darkness of an alley between the barn and the store.

Some one in the saloon came to a window and wiped away the hoarfrost, peering into the street. His shadow loomed huge against the light

on the pane and then vanished. Jed heard high laughter coming from inside, and thought of how it was too sudden. So he knew that the danger he felt was not aimed at him. This was a set stage onto which he had blundered, but he was not counted among the actors in the swift drama he felt was about to open.

He turned and started toward the door of the saloon, first cinching Fury to the rack. In that short pause a man came along the path beaten into the snow. Jed saw him only when he passed by the lighted window—a tall figure muffled into his clothes, whose blue eyes became thin points of ice probing the stranger at the hitch-rack.

Jed turned back to fuss with his saddle girth, waiting for the man to speak. But then he heard the door of the saloon close creakily behind him. So he stood for a long minute, thinking. From a corner of his eye he saw that the bent old man again came from the store and was loading another box over the tailboard of the wagon.

Suddenly Jed felt a storm of human emotions swirling about him more coldly than the snow-driving elements, and he decided to get out of a show that was not of his making. Now the danger sense was a sharp prickling at his skull as he made up his mind to travel. He threw one longing glance at the frosted window of the saloon beyond which he knew was warmth and the cheer of a brown bottle. Then even as he was lifting a foot to the stirrup, the snow glowed for one red instant. The flat crash of a forty-four drove him away from his horse and spun him about with his hand tense on his gun butt.

SOMEWHERE to his left a long shuddering sigh filled the empty spaces between the echoes of that shot. Then the door of the store was flung open and a figure came hurrying from the porch steps, rounding the wagon.

Into Jed's grasping thoughts came the rhythm of feet too light for a man's heavy tread, even before the sharp short cry told him it was a woman bending over the still form dark against the snow. Then because he heard the rush of boots in the saloon Jed stepped aside, gathering darkness about him.

He thought a number of men would burst into the street, but he saw only the tall blue-eyed man come out. In the weighted silence Jed heard the man's booted feet crunching down the fresh-fallen snow as he crossed to the wagon and stood near the lone woman, staring down at the death-huddled form by her.

Jed cast a long searching glance toward the saloon and stepped out, standing along the line of the hitch-rack where the horses were stamping restlessly. He still felt the warning echo that had come out of the storm to him, a warning that bade him mount and get out of this welter of strangled hatreds that was eddying through Wolf Lodge. But now something had held him fast, and it was the way the girl rose from her knees and the way she turned slowly to face him.

There was the light of the saloon dimly on her face and brightly in her eyes, and slashing a cold blue glint from the gun she held in her hand. Jed saw the tall man lay his hand on her shoulder as if to grip at the anger that drew her lips taut. She shrugged away from the detaining hand to advance three slow, deliberate steps into the middle of the street.

Jed knew that she had not spoken, yet his mind rang with her bitter thoughts that were accusing him of that wanton murder. So he called out in a flat voice that was oddly gentle, saying: "Wait up a minute, ma'am." And when he saw that she was listening he took his eyes from her and peered into the dark alley by the barn and said: "The feller what done the shootin' is hidin' in the shadow ahint you."

Then all the fast flow of the things that were happening slowed down for Jed Steele to the measure of his own quick reactions. He seemed to be moving in a ponderous dream. For now the girl half turned and glared toward the shadows, and when she saw the form of a man move toward the barn door she called out: "Joe Yaeger, is that you?" and got no answer.

Jed saw her lift the gun, aiming toward the man by the barn. That was when he caught the glint of the light on the gun rising in the hand of the killer she had called Joe Yaeger. As if that sight were a hair-trigger releasing his lightning energies, Jed's hand stabbed in a swift arc toward his right hip, the movement flicking the gun from its holster. The top of that arc was a level bead on the figure by the barn, so that Jed's Colt roared aside the silence before the other guns could speak.

Then again the drama settled on him in its retarded tempo, with the smoke of the shot drifting away into the snowfall. The man by the barn sagged in a tired way, and slumped into the endless stupor of death. The girl turned to look at Jed Steele, with the slow passing of the seconds before the light fell on her face.

JED tried to shake himself out of the steady drag of the moments, but the way the girl came toward him held him to the spell of the dream. And when she was near and looking up into his face, he sank deeper into the feeling of unreality, for he saw before him the substance of his long cravings. His eyes went over her then in slow bewilderment, finding the power and the courage in her moulded chin and the deep honesty in her wide-set eyes.

A thought made its rapid course through him, the realization that her face did not fully merit the sense of beauty her nearness gave him. He was flushed with the knowledge of a character whose clear strength gave color even to the sordid moment in the death-spotted street.

Jed Steele stood silent while the girl said: "The only way I can be thankin' you, stranger, is to warn you to ride clear. You just done shot yore way into a nest o' rattlers. Better drift afore they strike!"

She turned and went back to the wagon where the blue-eyed man helped her lift the body of the murdered man over the tailboard. And when she took the reins and lifted the grays into a hard run out of Wolf Lodge, Jed noticed that she did not look back.

Shadows were falling in long patterns across the white street, drawing Jed around. He saw then how faces were pressed close to the frosty windows of the saloon, and how when they moved back they left the dark holes of their hot breathing on the white rime.

Now the tall blue-eyed man came swinging past him with the eerie crunching of his boots in the packed snow. Jed looked up with surprise when he caught the warm tone as the man said: "Jean Crosby talked right when she tells you to move on, feller." The man went on and put his hand on the latch, turning to add: "Even if she do need somebody what's a real man to be helpin' her." He pressed in then, with the light of the lamps falling warm on his strong features, and Jed thought he saw the mouth draw grimly straight just as the door closed.

There was no longer the slow measure of his dreaming on Jed Steele. Now his alert mind snapped avidly at the thin and tangled threads of the weird pattern the last few minutes had wrought. He busied his hands reloading his gun. When he dropped it in the holster, after wiping the barrel clean of melted snow, he made sure it was dry enough to draw without binding against the oiled leather.

He glanced up the street at the deep track of the wagon. Then he

looked at the stiffened figure against the wall of the barn, and at the dark splotch in the snow where another body had been. Suddenly it all added up to the reason why he had been half glad to give up his ranch in the Panhandle, and a reason more far-flung that gave a sense of meaning to his whole life. That came to him when he thought of the girl, and the quick shrug of his shoulders cut the thread of his doubts. He decided to honor Wolf Lodge with his presence a while longer.

Then Jed Steele did the odd thing that was the brand of Jed Steele. He put back his head until the drifting flakes fell on his face, and laughed. The sound of it went pattering up and down the street, in between the buildings, and through the walls of the saloon.

When Jed turned on his heels and pushed through the door into the lighted warmth, he felt the impact of quick glances and a strong surge of thoughts pushing against him. Threaded through the silence was the thin harping of the danger sense fraying his nerves as he bellied up to the oft notched bar.

CHAPTER IV

Colt Savvy

JED stayed that way with his elbows up and his hands rubbing in front of his face, and the slow gust of his breath warming them. He nodded when the bartender called to him, saying: "Be with you in a shake, stranger." Jed seemed content to wait his turn and soak in the heat of the red-bellied wood stove. But his mind was busy with noting the things his eyes saw.

Back of the bar was a hazy mirror on which some crude artist had worked with a cake of soap. He had traced the frosty white figures of two unshapely wild mustangs on a billowing range of sparkling naphtha chips. Between the bucking figures there were clear spaces, and in them the flat reflection of the room stared back at Jed. But it was not only the gray walls and the hoary windows bright with the glow of kerosene lamps. There were also the faces of men gazing with a steady concentration that was too personal for mere interest in a stranger.

Jed caught the hard glint in the eyes of a shriveled gambler who sat at one of the three baize-covered tables. The man's thin lips were working as if with a silent rage while his narrow fingers nervously shuffled a deck of cards. Three men were playing at that table, only Jed saw they were not going on with their game.

Veiling his glance beneath the shadow of his hat's broad brim, he watched them in the mirror and saw the two of them bend toward each other. His ears caught the faint rustling of their whispers. Then one of them got up and moved out of his range of vision.

Jed thought he would turn and put his back to the bar, for there was that feeling on him like the slow crawling of a reptile across his nerve ends. But a cold draft of air surged around his legs and then the door went shut with a squeak of the hinges, so that he knew the man had gone out into the night.

The bartender moved toward him, wiping half the length of the bar with a dirty towel. Jed looked at the heavy-jowled man in the greasy apron and his mouth twitched a little as he thought: "Good thing alcohol gits rid o' p'isen, what with this gent a-handlin' it in them bottles."

Aloud he said: "Red-eye straight an' double."

Jed turned a little, so that only his left elbow remained hooked on the bar. His eyes made a circle of the room, seeing now where the tall blue-eyed man was seated just beyond the stove, rocked back on the staunch legs of an oak chair. Jed passed him without a second glance, sensing in

him no source of the thin tinge of danger that clung like deep fog to the room.

He felt it then, sharp as the thrust of a Mexican dagger, when his eyes met the steely glance of the gambler. Only it was not in the man's saturnine face until he smiled and said: "Dealin' a few hands o' stud, stranger. Int'rested any?"

Jed was watching the gambler's eyes and saw them shift past him. He turned then, facing the bartender who was setting his drink on the polished wood. There was the settling of muscles as the man tried to hide the cunning stamped on him, but Jed knew there had been a signal passed from the bartender to the gambler.

STILL Jed did not change expression as he reached into his pocket and spun a small coin across the bar. Then he turned again, answering the gambler: "I ain't heeled proper to be gittin' in no game, feller. Thanks jest the same."

He gave his attention to the drink, taking it in small fiery gulps, letting the cheap whisky burn its warmth into his insides. He began to relax, hearing the soft slap of the cards on the cloth.

But then the gambler said under his breath: "Too many damned strangers comin' to this range."

While Jed's mind was still busy with that he heard another sound behind him. It was leaden and dull, and when he looked back over his shoulder he saw a spinning coin on the bar.

Now Jed began to understand a little of what was going on, knowing the bartender had changed his good silver for a counterfeit. He could see it in the man's eyes, the thought of the accusation of cheating he would hurl. It still did not explain things, but he knew these men wanted him out of the way. So Jed Steele did the thing no one could understand about him. He put back his head and roared with laughter.

It was a sudden torrent of sound smashing aside the hard silence in the saloon, so that for a long moment afterward nothing happened. Then the gambler got up and walked aside toward the stove, and two chairs creaked as the men still at the table pushed back. Jed moved, too, taking a swift pace back along the bar so that he could see the bartender, and the way the bartender had one hand hidden below the ledge of the polished wood.

The glass in his hand was empty when Jed put it on the bar and said: "Fill 'er up again, feller."

He heard the bartender saying: "Not fer lead, hombre!" And then came the flat slap of a meaty hand on the wood, and again the dull ring of the fake coin.

Just then Jed happened to glance at the tall blue-eyed man and saw a warning in the ice-colored eyes that flicked toward a roughly boarded window at the dark end of the room. The part of him that belonged on the danger trail drew him to caution. But now in the trap that had been set for him he sensed the trouble that threatened the girl who had driven out of town with her death-chilled load.

It made a vicious curse rise in his throat, but he gave it no voice. Instead he answered the bartender, saying: "That's got the earmarks of a cold deck, hombre. But if you aims to take it, I kin jest as well pay fer the next drink with lead—hot or cold. Savvy?"

Jed had his eyes darting about now, watching the gambler and the two men at the gaming table and the gray-haired, blue-eyed man behind the stove. Then he flicked a quick glance at the bartender, who reached to take the glass from the bar. Only Jed noticed it was his left hand that came up while his right shoulder sagged slowly.

He saw it in the small pig-eyes of the bartender—that telltale puckering of the lids that was like a too quick pull on a trigger. Jed flung his long body back along the bar, spin-

ning on his heel and hunching down when the blast of the sawed-off shotgun ripped a jagged hole into the front boards of the bar. There was an echo of the loud roar of the shotgun, but it was one with the sharper spit of the Colt in Jed's hand.

A quick blue haze filled the room, slashed through with furious orange light as another gun barked behind him, the singing lead hurtling past his shoulder. Jed acted then the way an animal acts at bay, with his lips turned in flat against his teeth and the strong lines running away from his eyes. His wrist flicked around and jerked three times. With the chatter of his gun he heard a long broken sound above the quick splintering of the boards over the end window.

VOICES yelled above the din. One said: "Hold steady or I'll blast ye to hell!" And another was answering: "I ain't movin'." Then still another voice broke in, cursing: "Damn yore livers, git on yore feet an' fight!" Suddenly Jed knew it was his own mouth moving with those last words and he steadied, with the shock of his rage under control.

He took stock then, looking hard about the room. The two at the table were frozen shapes half risen from their chairs, their hands rigidly stuck midway in the draw. There was the gambler near the stove, shrunk to the size of his meanness. He was staring fixedly over his shoulder at the blue-eyed man whose hands were filled with death.

Too, there was the drifting of the blue smoke and Jed saw the slow coursing of a red tide beneath the lowest board of the bar front. He knew then how the bartender lay back there, crumpled over the hot barrel of the shotgun. And out in the alley beyond the barred window some one was coughing wetly, with a thick gurgling.

Now the door latch was lifting and drawing Jed's attention that way. A man came in out of the night and the reborn storm, bringing a flurry of flakes through the door that melted as they touched the warm floor.

Jed felt the solid impact of a brutal character and watched the man closely, seeing a red-blond giant before him. He counted the way the man's close-set milky-blue eyes sunk inward at sight of the gun, and flicked to the spreading pool of blood at the baseboard of the bar before they lifted to sweep the others in the room. Finally the gaze settled on the deal table and the pack of cards dropped on a staggered stack of chips.

"Deal me in, Howard. Stud, ain't it?" The deep unpleasant rumble of the big man's voice went flatly across the room. Jed watched narrowly and saw the gambler jerk about—as though he were a puppet on a string—and return to the table. The two rannies, careful to keep their hands in sight, also pulled up, making space between them for another chair into which the red-blond giant sank.

Jed let his glance flick to the blue-eyed man behind the stove, catching the short nod of the grizzled head that indicated the door. He crossed the room then, letting his gun slip into the holster but keeping his palm lightly on the butt. Now there was the quick slap of the shuffled cards and the low sputtering of the fire in the stove and a sharper last cough in the alley. Jed heard these things above the thin whine of the hinges as he opened the door and swung into the street.

Then the tall stranger came out of the saloon, standing abreast of him as he pulled the door shut. Afterward they stood still, watching the lighted windows, but seeing no movement and hearing only the low rumble of a hushed conversation inside.

The blue-eyed stranger moved to the hitchrack at last and climbed aboard a rangy sorrel. He waited then until Jed was in the saddle before he said: "Thurston's the name."

THERE was a long moment while Jed kept watching the windows. Finally Thurston spoke again, saying: "Any name will do." Jed looked at him then and saw the way the light from the saloon reflected in honest eyes.

So he shrugged and said: "Seems like once I went by the moniker o' Jed Steele."

Now something became hard and tense between them, and it could have been the sharp glance Thurston sent across the short space.

Then the blue eyes smiled with a deep knowing look behind them and Thurston spoke softly, saying: "Might've heerd it, but I cain't recollect when or whar'. Don't make no difference nohow. On'y I wants to give you a proper steer, seein' as how you stands up fer a friend o' mine."

Jed said quickly: "Meanin' the gal?" He wished he had kept still, for Thurston's eyes widened just a little with a wisdom garnered of his many years.

"Jean Crosby what owns the Box C up Rock Creek way." Thurston nodded toward the willow-fringed stream meandering off into the north-valley range. "What I was goin' to say is that the big feller you seen comin' in a while ago is Mark Yaeger, what owns the biggest spread hereabouts. It's the Bar Circle. Them war' his men in thar'. Includin' Howard, the tinhorn, an' the bartender an' the feller you clips through the window."

"An' who war' the gent I leaves layin' yonder by the livery barn?"

Jed saw a shadow move along the window. The door opened a thin crack, showing the pinched face of the gambler in the light. Then Howard quickly shut the door and the shadow passed back along the window.

Thurston had been watching, too. Now he hurried his speech a little. "That feller you plugs by the barn war' Joe Yaeger, Mark's no-account brother. No more account than Mark." The blue eyes became sharp lancets as Thurston leaned closer. It was only a momentary glance, but it made a difference in the man's tone, lining it with a brittle ice. "Thanks fer buttin' in, Steele. It makes it a little mite easier fer the Jean gal an' me to set up fer the fight what's a-comin'."

Now Jed held the quiet, hugging it to the thoughts in his mind. He heard Thurston add: "Yore way lies yonder to the south. *Adios.*" Then Thurston's horse turned out from the rack, making a deep track toward Rock Creek. Jed waited awhile, with something pulling him north toward Jean Crosby's Box C ranch. But then he saw how a number of shadows were crowding across the hoarfrost in the lighted window of the saloon. He spun Fury about and let out the reins, turning south out of Wolf Lodge.

Well below the town he pulled his horse off the shoulder of snow that marked the road. He eased up the long slope of the hills, keeping out of the timber where the snow lay thick and smooth, a treacherous blanket in which his tracks might well remain until the next thaw. But in the open windswept spaces the marks of his passing vanished under the hard beating of the storm.

From the clearings he could look down on Wolf Lodge and watch out for pursuit. When none came after a long while he stopped, shifting the troubled questions in his mind. Now the town was but a dark splotch against the white valley, the saloon showing like a black coffin laid on the snow.

From his high eyrie atop the east ridge he could trace the uncertain course of Rock Creek, a gray line of leafless willows reaching north and south. Beyond it and some miles up from town two square yellow lights pushed through the thinning curtain

of whirling snow. Jed figured them to be the lights of the Box C.

THEN even as he was turning to ride out of Jean Crosby's life and away from the sense of danger into the safety of the wilderness, Jed saw other lights spring up. These were nearer and on the west side of the creek.

Though the lights were loosely grouped, Jed could determine them coming from two separate buildings. So he thought of what the blue-eyed man had said, and knew the lights were from the Bar Circle spread. Probably in the main house and the bunk shack. Suddenly his mind filled with a vision of grim killers riding away toward the Box C.

Fury slipped and almost stumbled, so quick was the turning jerk on the reins as Jed swung north along the white ridge. When at last he rode out on a jut shelf above the Box C, there was a thin gray light filtering over the tumbled desolation of hills marking the eastern horizon. He sat there for an hour then, watching the landscape come up out of the night and the shadows growing thin on the snow.

Fury pricked sharp ears when Jed spoke his thoughts into the gathering dawn. "Them Bar Circle coyotes what's a-whettin' their teeth fer a kill ain't likely to go huntin' in the daytime. Guess we better hang around an' see what come off after dark."

He rode into the trees, well back from the ledge. Finding a cut-bank behind which the snow pack had left a clear space, Jed loosed the saddle and picketed Fury on the length of his rope. Then he made up his bedroll close to the cut-bank and turned in. The gray storm-wracks moved on to the west, letting the rising sun glint from the myriad diamonds of the fresh-fallen snow. Jed's closed lids became a wild chaos of color into which his dreaming etched a likeness of Jean Crosby.

CHAPTER V

Saddle Pards

WHEN Jed Steele awoke to find the girl standing over him he thought it was still of his dreaming. But then she spoke, saying: "I come up to ask you things," and he knew her presence.

He answered a curt, "Go ahead, ma'am," wondering how she found him.

But she told that when she said: "I was awake all night worryin' about the how o' things. An' when I see you ride out to the edge o' the bluff in the dawn, I figgers maybe you can help me with my thinkin'."

Jed rubbed the sleep from his face with a handful of the brittle snow, wiping it with a corner of his bandanna. All the time he was listening to her voice, and the way it was soft even with the heaviness of her despair in it.

So he said: "I got me some stuff in my saddle bags, an' I figgers it's fair safe to make a quick blaze up here. We'll have some coffee in no time." But she shook her head, answering: "Thar' ain't nary a reason for that. Nobody's lookin' fer you, so you might's well come traipsin' down to my place an' have a square meal."

She did not wait for his word, but went away toward her horse. Jed's eyes followed her into the saddle. Then when he turned to cinch his bedroll on Fury his thought kept pace with her, remembering the free swing of her stride and the supple sway of her shoulders. These things were in his mind as he rode out of the pines and they took the downgrade.

Afterwards there was a stretch of the valley range to cross and as the horses settled to a slow lope the girl spoke again.

"I'm Jean Crosby an' we're on Box C land now."

Jed answered: "Jed Steele is the name." Seeing the quick lift of her eyes toward him, he added: "Mebbe you done hear o' me afore this."

"No, that I ain't." She nodded toward the ranch buildings, graying in the distance against the snow. "But Hal Thurs knows you. He's got a mind like a steel trap. Ain't likely to forget a name or a face even if he see it on a reward sheet."

Jed understood then that she knew about him from Thurston, and was made sure by her next words.

"You don't look none like a killer to me." Again her glance leapt to him. Seeing the wide grin with which he appreciated her remark, she looked away. But then her eyes wavered back to him and she let herself smile. Jed had the queer feeling that it was the first lightness that had touched her in a long time.

He said: "I'd be obliged to know a mite o' what the ruckus war' about last night in town." He waited for her answer, a little sorry for having said that. For now her face lapsed again into dark drawn lines of hurt and impotent anger, and the grim despair of a lone woman fighting a world of pitiless men.

It was there in the range of her voice, too, for she answered: "It's a long story an' it ain't pleasant."

Jed said curtly: "I kin bear with it."

He slowed Fury to a walk, and Jean Crosby matched him. As they went on toward the nearing ranch spread, she talked in a monotone that was a mark of her hopelessness.

"It all started some four years ago when the Yaegers came in the valley. 'Bout that time there were a half dozen small ranchers doing fair and getting along right neighborly. But soon as them Yaegers come in they started a ruckus, setting the ranchers agin each other, and the two of them profiting meanwhiles."

Her eyes swept into the distance beyond the creek and toward the town. "There still be three little fellers managing on their own south of Wolf Lodge, but I'm the only one still hanging on in the north valley. Now that you killed Joe, Mark Yaeger's got all the rest of the range, and he's aiming to get hold of mine any day."

JED let his gaze fall away from her still face and sweep aside to a clearing near the house. There were two unshapely dark splotches there, only half covered by the night's fall of snow.

"What's them yonder?" He let his head nod that way.

Jean Crosby's shoulders drooped and her voice went a note lower. "One was the barn and the other the feed stack. Burnt the same week but not the same night. You can figger that near as I can."

Jed's figuring stacked up the dark splotches as two black marks against the Yaeger outfit and he said so, adding: "What else is in the books again' 'em?"

"I come in here when I was a little girl, with three of my kin. My dad got killed fightin' off a bunch of rustlers who was headin' one of his herds toward Yaeger range. Last fall my brother come to the homelands to die, sayin' how he got caught in an ambush down near the ford of the creek, what's only a mile from the Bar Circle spread." The shudder that went through her body echoed into her voice. "Last night you saw how my uncle was killed. I expect I'm next to go the same way."

Jed cracked out: "But yo're a woman!"

Then he checked himself, hearing her bitter wild words: "You ain't knowin' the Yaeger blood!"

That was the last of their talk, for now they rode into the ranch yard. Thurston was standing in the doorway, welcoming them with a wave of his hand. Then Jed went to the corral with the two horses, while Jean Crosby hurried into the kitchen. Thurston stepped back into the living room and waited until Jed, stamping the snow from his boots, pushed through the door and went straight to the fire blazing on the hearth.

At first there was only the normal greeting of two strangers between them. But as Jed was rolling a cigarette and lighting up he half turned and said: "Am I to figger you as bein' after the reward?" Then he swung all the way around, pulled by the pleasant laughter that came from Thurston.

"Guess I done missed the point o' the joke." Jed said that evenly but without heat, seeing the humor wrinkling the older man's eyes.

"Ain't nary a joke, Steele—" Thurston sat down in a rocker, stretching his legs comfortably toward the fire—"unless it be on Yaeger."

Jed let his nerves go loose and said between deep puffs of smoke: "How come you to figger that?"

The blue eyes of the old man twinkled again, but now there was no merriment behind the lowered lids. "These yere Crosbys was peaceful folks, so they gits kilt off. Now I wonders how much of a real killer Yaeger kin stomach."

"That's a deep brand to be puttin' on a man," Jed flared with sudden resentment, angrily flicking the cigarette into the flames.

"It's bin put on you by others, son." Thurston's tone was an assurance of his good will. "Mebbe I had better be tellin' you a mite o' the way o' things here so you kin git to understandin' why I'm so durned glad to have you come a-messin' into things."

"The gal's done told me enough." Jed let that out with the hint of a curse behind his words. "If she need my help she jest got to ask fer it."

"An' that she won't." Thurston shook his head sadly. "That's one o' her troubles. Too durned proud to be askin' fer help an' too durned brave to be sneakin' away."

Jed said: "That's what I figgers her to be like." He sensed some sudden gladness go through him. Then seeing Thurston's wide glance, he added: "Free woman, ain't she?"

"Fer any man what's good enough to claim her." Thurston let that sink in, holding his peace meantime, then went on cautiously: "That brand o' the killer what's been put on you down Panhandle way—I'm wonderin' how come, since you ain't got the earmarks o' murder on you."

JED sampled the flavor of the old man's speech, sucking at his teeth and half listening to the sounds of the Crosby girl moving about in the kitchen. Then he said: "The name o' the feller in Texas war' Dave Means instead o' Mark Yaeger, but the breed war' the same."

"Must've hurt some to give up yore ranch." The blue eyes opened wide and centered on the flames leaping on the hearth. "I'm jest takin' it fer granted you did have a ranch."

"It didn't hurt so much I couldn't take it with a laugh." Jed's lips stretched to a grin. "Was a-fixin' to go moseyin' anyway. A Panhandle ranch kin be a mighty lonely place fer a lonesome man."

For a moment he did not notice that Jean Crosby had come into the room, hearing the last of what he had to say. Then when Jed did look up at her, he wondered why her eyes were shiny bright with silent words they spoke to him. But it made the blood in his veins leap like a Nevada mustang.

Thurston saw the way the rawboned Texan near the fireplace stiffened his gaze and it made him turn. Seeing the girl in the room, he rose slowly, hiding his quick smile behind slow-drawling words. "Vittles, Jean? I cain't exact say I wouldn't savor a gulp o' coffee juice right pronto."

"Then come an' get it afore it freeze up." The girl answered Thurston, but it was plain that her invitation was more to Jed Steele.

Through the hearty meal Jed's eyes kept swinging to Jean Crosby with almost every mouthful he took. But then just as she was filling his cup for the third time his glance jerked out through the window of the kitch-

en away across the yard. His attention settled on a moving mass of figures dragging over the range.

Then the girl spoke to him, saying: "How about another cut o' this bread to go with yore coffee?"

When she got no answer her eyes followed him. The sharp intake of her breath that was a whimper caused Thurston to get up in a hurry and go around the table to the side of the kitchen. Now all three of them could see what was going on out there.

Thurston said: "Yaeger's riders." His tone was a throaty growl thinly veiling his quick anger. Then Jean said: "His riders an' the last o' my herd."

Then Jed asked: "Jest like that, in broad daylight?"

And Thurston answered: "Jest like that!"

Jed's glance veered from the window to the girl's face, and something in its deep-lined hurt edged his veins with frost. He pushed back from the table, growling: "Guess I've had enough to stomach!" And what he meant was not what he said.

He swung on a grating heel and jerked out through the door into the yard. There was an urgency to the rapid stride that took him out to the corral where Fury nickered gently as he approached. But Jed had no word for his horse this morning. His avid hand grasped the carbine from the saddle holster and he marched back to the very center of the yard, with his hands rubbing along the cold stock of the gun.

Out there on the range he saw some change take place. The three riders who had been hazing the small herd went clear of the cattle, drawing together and watching him. Jed measured the distance then and his thumbnail dug in under the sight of the gun, raising it to the limit of its shot. He heard the door of the kitchen open and quick feet patter across the hard snow of the yard. When he turned he saw Thurston standing by the door, one hand heavy on the forty-four slung at his hip.

Jean Crosby was running toward him across the yard, crying: "No, don't start anything. Please don't!"

JED did not know that it was her fear that was hammering his anger into full rage, nor that red lights were glinting in his eyes as he turned to face her. All he knew was that Jean stopped a brace of yards away, staring at him with quick horror. Then she moaned and covered her face and went back toward the house. But when she was halfway there she sank to her knees and her sobbing became a dull beat on the silence.

Jed's thoughts that were racing around her came sharply alert when a flat sound smashed aside the stillness. There was a high whine and then the dull thud as a slug of lead buried itself into the logs of the ranch house. Other sounds were repeating the first, and when he spun about he saw the flames flashing out there on the range, and the slow smoke eddying around the three riders.

"Damn yore souls to hell!" Jed's outburst was born of his fear that Jean might get in the line of firing.

His carbine came level and bucked hard against his shoulder. That steadied him, that and the knowledge that his shot had gone high. Now he jammed the lever of the gun and put a steady pull on the trigger, holding the sight on one of the three riders. Again the stock slammed against his shoulder, brushing his cheek, and again he flipped the lever.

The empty shell fell into the snow and made a dark mark there. It was a little like that other shell emptied of life that tumbled from its horse out on the range and made a dark bloody spot on the frozen ground. And when Jed fired his fifth shot, another rider slid from his saddle, so that only one of the three rode clear of the fight, fagging a fear-crazed gallop out of range of the carbine.

The rage went ebbing out of Jed

then, and he dropped the hammer on his gun. Thurston went by him toward the corral, but Jed paid no attention to him, watching the last of the riders spurring toward the Bar Circle.

Then Thurston, mounted on his roan, ambled past and called: "I'll go out yonder an' see how close you war' shootin', Steele." He went on out of the yard, loping toward the two dark unmoving splotches on the range.

Jed's eyes kept following for a while, until he heard the deep sobbing of Jean Crosby. Then a sudden fear made him run toward her, calling her name, for he remembered the way the leaden slugs had whined about the yard. But when he pulled her to her feet and saw that she was not hurt, it sent the relief out of him in a long gasp.

He thought now how she would smile at him, glad of his presence. But when he lifted her chin with his cold fingers and looked into her face, he found it chilled and bitter with something he could not understand. Suddenly she jerked away and ran stumbling to the door, where she turned to fling back: "Git out, killer! You done enough damage, so crawl on yore hoss an' keep goin'!"

Jed saw tears hurrying down her blanched cheeks, and that made him stand rigidly still. Then the girl cried out: "I war' a fool to think a wolf could ever be any like a man!"

She turned into the house, slamming the door hard. Jed remained with his gaze fastened on the rough wood, his mind whirling under the shock of her words. Then he slowly made his way to the corral.

He was astride Fury and starting out of the yard when Thurston rode back and called out: "Hold up a minute, Steele." So Jed reined in and waited, and when the old man rode up he said: "You sure got the knack o' shootin' on a straight sight. Both o' them hombres out yonder be dead as doornails."

"That's what I figgered." Jed spoke dully.

Thurston looked up, asking: "What's rilin' you, Steele?"

Jed thought for a long minute before he broke out with an angry word. "Dammit, I jest cain't figger that thar' Crosby gal. She's actin' most like she hates the guts o' me, an' sayin' as how I done raised hell hereabouts!"

Thurston laughed shortly, then sobered as he caught Jed's hard look. "The gal ain't half wrong in what she says, Steele. You done knocked off Mark Yaeger's brother last night as well as one o' his riders an' the bartender, who belong to his gang, too. An' now you go slap two more o' them riders into Kingdom Come."

The old man nodded his head as if he were thinking aloud. "Yes, I'm purty sure the gal figgers right. Come this time tomorrow mornin' Yaeger will be evenin' up on the small ranches fer what you done. An' most likely he'll be doin' his dirtiest ag'inst the Box C."

Jed looked at the old man. Then he swung his gaze in a wide circle, checking on the ranch house, on the two still figures on the range, and last on the fringe of the willows along Rock Creek behind which lay the Bar Circle.

As he drew on his glove he said: "Figger you might git some help from the little ranches in the south valley?"

"When an' what fer?" Thurston bit the words off sharp.

"Bring 'em around tonight at ten an' keep 'em in the willows smack near Yaeger's spread." Jed's eyes were turning inward with his furious thinking. "When you sees a haystack or a barn go up in smoke, ride in a-shootin'."

Thurston nodded, asking: "What else?"

Jed swung his horse away toward the range, turning in the saddle toward the house. His eyes narrowed for an instant, thinking he saw a fig-

ure slip back away from one of the windows.

He looked at Thurston and called out: "Tell the Jean gal I aims to put out the hell-fire I done got started!" He lifted Fury to a fast lope, putting his face to the bright sun and the eastern hills.

CHAPTER VI

Death on the Prod

JED STEELE rode no farther than the ridge that morning. Through the short spring day he followed the shadowed edge of the timber, twice riding the length of the valley, always slanting his eyes downward. About noon he saw a rider leave the Box C and head south, and knew it would be Hal Thurston.

He followed the man's progress and saw him pause at two of the small spreads in the lower valley and finally stop at the third. Afterwards Jed found a place on a high straight line with Yaeger's Bar Circle and squatted at the edge of the sunshine, his eyes slitted with a distant stare.

For long hours he saw no movement below him, and it gave space to his thoughts. Twice he turned from the valley, away from Jean Crosby, thinking of the far reaches of his freedom if now he rode eastward. But once he remembered that there would always be towns with saloons that had reward posters tacked on the wall. The other time he recalled the way the girl had looked at him in the living room of Box C. So Jed went back to his watching of the valley, with a deep warm knowing in him that his freedom had no worth unless he could share it.

The night shadow was fast creeping up the slope when at last he saw two riders arrive at the Bar Circle. They had hardly entered when another rider came cutting along the willows, turning short into the yard and leaving his horse with drag reins. He, too, went into the house, and twenty minutes later Jed saw two others lope in from the range.

Earlier in the day he had caught a glimpse of Mark Yaeger, knowing him by his awkward heavy slouch. A tall ranny who had been with the boss of the Bar Circle, Jed took to be the outfit's ramrod, probably one of the two men he had seen playing stud in the saloon.

The light was fast failing in the valley when Jed saw another figure move across the yard, turning into the small shedlike building attached to the main house. That, he thought, would be the cook going in to make supper. A few minutes later a streamer of blue smoke strung away from the tin chimney over the shack and Jed knew he had been right.

He waited then until the sun went down and the deep purple shadow slid up over him. And while he waited he was counting heads. Yaeger and the ramrod and five men and the cook. Eight all told was the way it figured to him.

Jed shrugged his shoulders, muttering: "The odds be fair to middlin'." He climbed into the leather, setting Fury at a steady slow pace down the slope.

Crossing the silent dark range toward the lights of the ranch house filtering through the bare willows by the creek, Jed ran into his mind a picture of the spread. There was the big house and the cook shack attached to it, and the corral beyond with a huge rambling barn hard by it. He had caught a glimpse of another low long building near the trees. That would be the bunkhouse. When he reached Rock Creek Jed left Fury cinched to a willow and crossed the thinning ice.

Before him the bunkhouse loomed silent and blind. He moved across the few yards of open space and hunkered in the deep shadow of the log wall. Glancing up at the stars once, measuring his time, Jed settled back to await his ten o'clock appointment with sudden death.

WHEN next he looked up a thin haze had slid in from the west and the stars were blanketed from sight. Jed turned and tried to penetrate the gloom beneath the willows. His ears caught the sound of a horse picking his way through the crusted snow. Jed forgot the way he had left Fury loosely tied to the tree, and thought that Thurston had arrived with the ranchers from the south valley.

Jed muttered: "The odds be more even now."

He rose and stretched the cramp from his knees. His hand went fumbling in his jacket pocket as he slid around the corner of the building. A moment later he had the matches in his hand as he slipped like a dark soundless shadow into the bunkhouse.

When he came out again there was the sound of flames crackling through ripped straw ticking. Jed silently pulled the door to and went on across the yard. In those few minutes in the bunkhouse he had carefully covered all the windows with blankets, so that now his backward glance found no telltale flare of the fire already raging inside.

The gun was cold against his palm when Jed neared the cook shack and stopped to rub it warm. Just then the lights inside were blown out and a hand fell on the latch. Like a fleeting wolf Jed slipped aside, cowering behind a big barrel set near the stoop. He heard the door open and close on a rusty hinge. The sound grated against his spine and made his teeth lock.

Then there came the crunching in the snow as the cook crossed the yard toward the bunkhouse. Jed whirled away from the barrel and stepped up on the porch, putting his hand on the latch and pressing it as though it were a trigger.

The squeak of the hinges was lost in the shrill yelp of alarm that cut through the quiet of the yard. For an instant Jed saw the red flare of the flames beating into the air and making ruddy the cook's startled face. Then the door shut behind him and he flattened near a window. Away from the angle of his sight the door of the ranch house burst open, spewing a mass of excited men into the open. Jed counted five of them making their fast way toward the fire.

From the direction of the porch came Yaeger's wild bellow, sounding the rage in the rancher. Then another sound came in through the window, and for a moment Jed thought it would be Thurston riding with the south ranchers. So he fixed his eyes on the men milling about the fire and missed seeing Jean Crosby swing down from her horse and hurry toward the porch. But Jed did see the way the men turned away from the heat of the fire, staring at the ranch house.

And now he heard Jean's rapid voice saying: "I come over to warn you somethin' like this might happen."

Yaeger's voice rose after a heavy silence, shouting: "You mean you come over to set fire to my place, you hellcat!"

Cold fury that swept through Jed Steele as he heard the girl's sharp cry sent him reeling backward and his heel caught against a corner of the big kitchen table. Cursing at his awkwardness, he spun aside, grabbing into the darkness. For a moment his hand clung to a board ledge nailed into the wall at the side of the hot stove. Then it came away in his hand and there was the sharp tinkle of broken glass as a coal-oil lamp smashed down.

JED made a crouching dive that carried him across the shack in time to escape the quick flare of the flames as the kerosene caught fire from the stove. Then for a moment he watched the blue flame creeping across the dry floor, flickering red where it blazed into the wood.

Because it reminded him of his own shack in the Panhandle going up in flames and of the dark patches on the snow where Jean Crosby's feed and barn had burned, Jed put back his head and laughed. There was a joy and a madness in his laughter, so that it went out of the blazing shack and cut across the yard, and silenced all but the feverish crackling of the flames that were devouring the bunkhouse.

Jed wiped his hand across his mouth and said: "Now all hell's goin' to bust loose!" And presently lead began to bite into the cook shack door.

Now the fire was lighting up the small shack so that he saw the other door and figured it would lead into the big house. Jed emptied his gun toward the square of the window, firing blindly. But his Colt was again reloaded by the time he pushed open the side door and stepped into a narrow hall. At the other end another door stood half open, and through it Jed could see into the living room. There was movement in there, and he heard the girl's voice rising angrily.

"Let me go, Yaeger. Let me go!"

That wrought a heat in Jed greater than the heat of the flames behind him, and he started toward the sound with his shoulders hunched. Suddenly the light was brushed away from the hall, then it spilled in again as the end door was flung open. Jed's eyes squinted into the quick brilliance that found him, so he could see beyond the big ramrod who stood just on the threshold, to where Jean was struggling vainly in Yaeger's grasp. Things slowed down for him then to the slow ticking of the clock in the room, until that was drowned out by Yaeger's sharp command:

"Drop 'im, Crede! Hank, Burt, Jeff! Come a-runnin'!"

Then a sound that was greater than Yaeger's voice drowned out every other. It was the terrific bellowing of guns in the close-set space of the hall, and the heavy falling of Crede as Jed's single shot lifted his feet off the floor and flung him down again. There was one brief instant when Jed could have turned his gun on Yaeger, but the rancher flung the girl's slim body around to cover his own. He pawed to free one hand from her desperate grip and reach for his gun.

Jed knew his chance had gone in that moment, for now there was the hard stamping of boots in the big room and Yaeger yelling: "He's in the hall, an' he cain't git back through the cook shack. And blast 'im to hell!"

Jed saw the way Yaeger went

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aside, dragging Jean Crosby with him. It made a madness seep into his veins, the urge driving him toward the door. But then he stopped, rocking back on his heels, turning his face behind a lifted elbow that felt the sharp impact of slivers bullet-torn from the casing. Yaeger's crew of killers was steadily pumping lead, hemming him into the protected corner at the rear of the hall.

Jed shook his head as if to clear the haze from his mind that was the heat coming through the wall of the burning cook shack. Suddenly his gun ripped three flashes of vicious light into the gloom, though he fired straight ahead, remembering that Jean was somewhere to one side. Then his hand pressed down on the latch of the door at the rear, so that the heat of it burned right through his glove. But a quick wrench flung the door open and Jed dove through, slamming it shut behind him.

Red tongues of flame licked at his clothing as he rolled and scrambled to the far wall, pressing close to the rough floor for the slight comfort of thinner smoke. There was the roar of the fire in his ears and above that the whine of lead blasting through the door and the window. And far above that the fading memory of Jean Crosby's voice.

Then Jed Steele began to laugh, with the terrible grim laughter of a man walking the thirteen steps to the gallows. Smoke poured into his lungs, choking the sound in his throat. His tortured eyes narrowed to mere slits as he lunged upward and flung himself again toward the door of the hall. Blinded more by the rage within him than the lurid flames that licked at his passing form, he went headlong into the wall. The blow knocked him back a long shambling pace and filled his ears with a roaring.

The sudden pounding of charging hoofs as Thurston led the ranchers into the yard and the rising burst of firing, came to him as a dim undertone. He did not think then of what it might mean, for Jed Steele thought he was facing the end of his destiny, believing it strung on the thin whine of bullets.

That he might even die before he could shoot Jean Crosby free never entered his mind. Nor did he remember that there were but two bullets left in his gun. All he knew was the thing he was about to do. Wrenching open the door into the hall, he took one determined step toward the living room.

Then Jed Steele stopped and that moment stopped with him. One pace ahead of him stood Mark Yaeger with Jean still pinned against him. He was holding her with his left arm while he swung about, lifting the gun that was in his right hand.

Now the narrow hall filled again with the bright flash and the acrid odor of burnt powder. Jed slammed back against the door frame, feeling the white flame of the pain as the bullet seered his side. And it was the weight of his failure that made his knees buckle under him.

CHAPTER VII

Hangtree Bait

THE life that seemed to be ebbing away from Jed Steele gave him a sharper moment to live, one in which all things came to him clearly. He was conscious of the crackling flames in the cook shack, and Jean's high-pitched scream, and a voice he thought was Thurston's yelling: "Git Yaeger if he try to come out through the shack!" Then he heard the thin moaning of a wounded man whose outstretched hand lay near the threshold of the door at the end of the hall.

It was the sharp clarity of that moment that let him see how Jean was struggling with Yaeger, so that the rancher could not use his gun again. Jed gathered the strength to rise, steadying his back for a short span against the wall.

Then Yaeger flung the girl away with a vicious curse, and lost balance with the effort so that he slipped and fell to his knees. That was how Jed caught the girl and tumbled backward with her. They crashed into the inferno of the cook shack, where the flames had already eaten through the front wall so that only a sheet of fire kept him from seeing into the yard.

Jean's head crushed on his cheek, bruising against the stubble of his thin beard as they fell. Her low whimper reached into Jed's consciousness, charging him with a gust of power that showed in the trembling of his arms. He was on his feet, dragging the girl up with him, even before the flames caught at their clothing. His legs braced wide and his shoulders tense, he threw her across the shack with all his strength and saw her vanish into the yard beyond the wall of flames. Then he turned and lunged toward the hall, straight past the streaking yellow flame from Yaeger's gun.

A flood of wild joy swept through him, catching at his throat, as he felt Yaeger go down beneath his charge. The gun clattered away into the flames, and hearing that, Jed let his fingers search for the rancher's throat. But when they clamped deep into the flesh he felt no quick tightening of the muscles and no answering surge of the body beneath him. So he eased aside and for a moment could not understand why Yaeger did not move.

But now he saw the way the rancher's back lay athwart the step, and the queer sideway bend of the bulky body, as if it were without a spine. Still his fingers clung to the flaccid throat, loath to give up this moment of revenge.

At last the edge of Jed's jacket caught fire with a quick red flame and he beat it out with his bare hand. The sting of heat against his palm cleared his mind for a sharp instant. Turning then, he drove his weary legs toward the flames, throwing up his arm to shield his face.

His knees gave way and he sprawled, with his cheek pressed into the grateful cold of the snow melting in the yard near the fire. Then gentle hands were on him, lifting him away from the heat, and he heard deep anxious voices forcing into his failing consciousness. The last he remembered then was the sharp knife thrust of cool clean air surging into his tortured lungs.

WHEN Jed Steele came to he found that he had been moved into the big barn beyond the corral. Blankets spread in the aisle between the stalls was his bed, and something warm and sof was pillowing his head. He let his gaze go out through the big open door and across the yard where hurrying figures were moving about the ranch house. Only a few crawling embers and a great dark stain showed where the cook shack had been.

Some one who stood behind him spoke, and for a moment Jed did not recognize Thurston's voice. But the soft drawl caught at his ears, and what the man was saying: "Of course this ain't the exact right way fer a deppity marshal to be takin' care o' things, but them Yaegers had a killin' comin' to 'em anyway, so I'm satisfied."

Jed thought it strange that his pillow moved when Jean's voice answered: "I'm sure glad you come down here to look into our troubles, Mister Thurston. Without yore helpin' us the Yaegers would be ownin' the valley now."

"They owns six feet apiece, which is some considerable more than coyotes deserves." Thurston moved up a step and saw the way Jed's eyelids flickered. He turned aside to hide his quick grin that bent at the corners of his mouth. "I war' thinkin' o' what's to happen to the Bar Circle lands. D'you figger you'd sort o' like to be ownin' it, Jean?"

Again Jed's pillow moved, this time quickly as the girl answered: "No, I don't feel I got rights to it. I figgers if anybody does, it's this Jed Steele. He done most o' the rat-trappin'."

"Sounds most reasonable-like." Thurston moved close and touched the girl's shoulder. "I'm thinkin' he's comin' out of it right now. Mebbe you better get him a drink to sort o' clear his throat when he wakes up."

Jed felt his head lifted between tender hands and then his pillow moved away while the hands lowered him to the blankets. He was sure he preferred things as they had been, but said nothing and closed his eyes. Only when he heard rapid footsteps sounding down the aisle did he look up and watch Jean Crosby as she went out.

"Feelin' some considerable better, Steele?" Deputy Marshal Thurston knelt down in the straw and looked searchingly into Jed's drawn face.

"Thanks." Jed forced the words through a raw and aching throat. "Done felt some better afore this, but I'm guessin' I'll live."

"Afraid you will at that." Thurston nodded somberly, hiding his grin as he dug into a pocket and brought out a piece of paper which he unfolded. "D'you reco'nize this?"

One glance assured Jed of what he already suspected. He nodded his head as his face set into a hard mask.

"Yep, I seen the likes of it afore. Funny to be wuth a lot more dead than I am alive."

Thurston threw a hurried glance into the yard, seeing Jean Crosby returning with a bottle in her hand. He spoke quickly then, saying: "I'm thinkin' the other way around, feller. Yore heart is too durn big an' clean to let you be a fust-rate killer. But you might prove up a fair to middlin' sort of a rancher once you gits the deed to the Bar Circle."

Thurston rose quickly, patting the dust from his knees. Jed saw him ball the reward poster tight in his fist and walk to the end of the aisle. There the deputy marshal turned and said: "Reckon thar' be enough fire left out yonder to burn this."

Then Jean Crosby came into the barn and Thurston turned to her, saying: "I'll be pullin' out o' the valley this mornin', gal, so this'll be *adios*. I'm leavin' that thar' fire-eatin' hombre in yore care. An' come sometime when he's feelin' purty good I wisht you'd remind him o' somethin'. That it takes a lot o' fire to temper what's best in a man."

Jed jerked up on one elbow, so great was his surprise to hear the marshal use the words with which he had quit the Panhandle. But now Thurston was gone, and Jed saw the way Jean Crosby came to him, with a smile on her lips.

Jed Steele waited until Jean was kneeling beside him, and he felt the pressure of her fingers on his hand.

Then Jed Steele put back his head and laughed.

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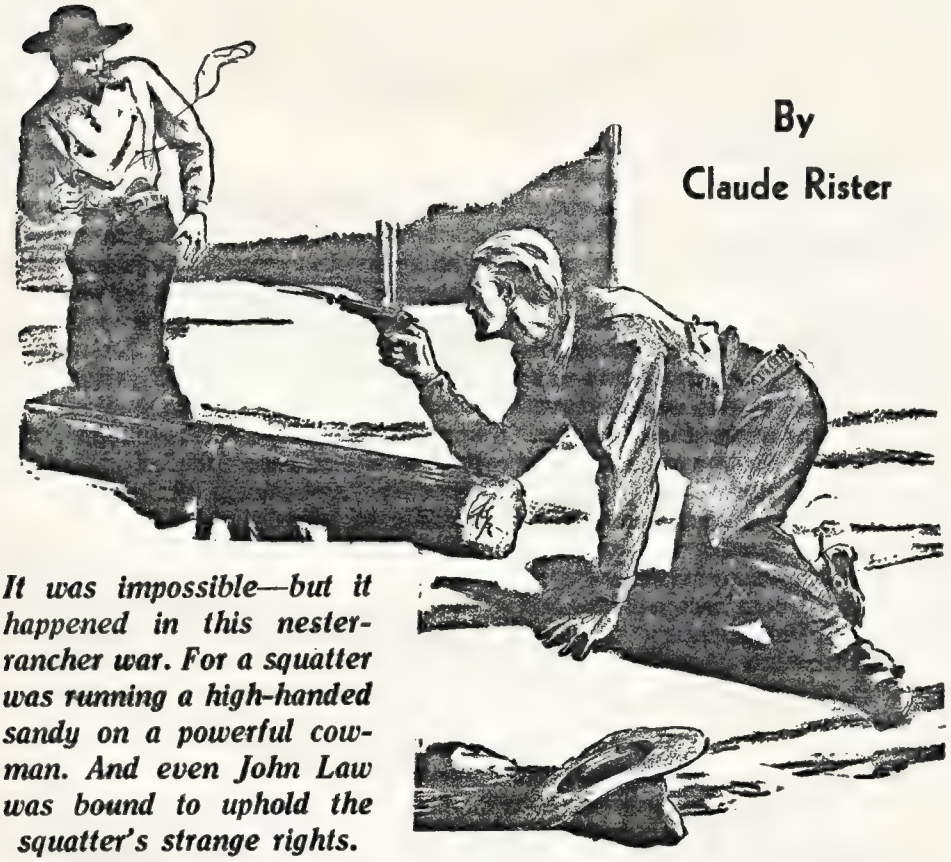

By

Claude Rister

It was impossible—but it happened in this nester-rancher war. For a squatter was running a high-handed sandy on a powerful cowman. And even John Law was bound to uphold the squatter's strange rights.

THE sounds of conflict brought Stace Gentry to an abrupt halt. Tense in his saddle, he listened. The little bay horse he rode perked its ears and listened too, the while its distended nostrils gently sampled the liquid air.

On such still spring mornings sounds carry clearly for considerable distances, and these noises of angry conflict registered quite distinctly upon Stace Gentry's hearing. There were blows that thudded heavily, and a furious cursing that poured out in a steady tirade.

"Sounds like somebody's taking a terrible beating," muttered Stace. "I got to look into this, especially since it's happening on my range."

He wheeled the bay pony to the right, spoke a sharp word to the animal, and went galloping through the scattered oaks. Still as the morning was, a thick carpet of emerald green grass almost completely muffled the falling of the hoofs.

Stace topped a flower-dotted little swell and immediately discovered the source of the angry turmoil. Before him ran a broad ribbon of trail. Beside it was a clump of cottonwoods which he knew shaded a spring. Be-

neath one of the giant trees was a covered wagon, with a team of chunky ponies attached.

One of the horses was down on its haunches, tangled in the harness, its bulk resting against the wagon tongue. Beside the animal and savagely wielding a steel wagon rod was a bearded man attired in cheap clothing. He was swinging the rod with all the power of his sinewy body, and every time that it t h u d d e d against the balky horse's ribs it left a long welt. Already the pony's body was striped and crisscrossed with those marks.

At first the sight made Stace sick at heart, and then anger came boiling up within him. Almost before he realized what he was doing he was charging down upon the stranger.

"Hey, stop that, you murderin' coyote!" he shouted.

The fellow did stop it, and looked around in surprise. He was an angular, big-boned man with coppery eyes and reddish whiskers. The face was hard and ruthless.

Stace flung himself out of the saddle and in his anger he allowed the momentum of that quick dismount to carry him right on to the man. He seized the wagon rod, which the stranger now was holding loosely, and jerked it away from him.

"You ought to be horsewhipped yourself, beating a cayuse like that!"

"The cussed critter balked on me," snarled the other. "I'd like to kill him. I will if he keeps it up. Gimme back that rod and mind your own business. I—"

"Oh, no you don't! You try to abuse that poor animal any further and I'll bend this wagon rod over your head! You ought to know you can't punish a balky horse into pulling. The more you abuse them the more crazy scared they become and they won't budge. A horse in a burning stable is the same way—you've got to be gentle with 'em until you get 'em going. Them ain't work horses nohow," he observed as he noted the smooth shoulders of the animal which was down. The pony lurched to its feet now; stood quivering, snorting, eyes rolling crazily.

The nostrils of the stranger's flat nose dilated, and a dangerous glitter came into the coppery eyes. "Who are you, anyway, Mr. Horninsky?" he asked, as his right hand crept toward the heavy pistol which sagged low in a worn old holster at his wiry right thigh.

"Happens I'm Stace Gentry, owner of the range you're on right now, but which you ain't going to stay on much longer. H'ist yourself into that wagon, I'll get your team going."

The fellow did not move for a moment, just stood there gazing at Stace, and a most peculiar expression spread over the hard visage. At first it was an intense look of mingled curiosity and fierce hatred, then quickly it turned to one of mocking humor, gloating. To Stace Gentry's utter surprise he suddenly threw back his head and let out a yapping laugh, one that squinted his eyes and showed long, sharp teeth. When finally the yapping ceased and he looked again at the chunky cowboy the metallic brown eyes were sparkling wickedly. His sides were jolting in a noiseless chuckle.

"What's so daggoned funny?" snapped Stace, his rugged face hard and his blue eyes wintry.

"Oh, I just happened to think of a good joke," the other answered mysteriously. Then he swung around on worn boot heels, climbed to the springseat and took the slack out of the lines. "All right, cowpoke, let's see you get that balky horse to pullin'." There still was a broad grin on his face.

Stace eyed him keenly. Apparently he hadn't been drinking. Then maybe he was crazy. He was wondering as he moved to the pony whose body was all ridgy from the terrific beating it had taken.

The little horse snorted and quivered anew as Stace came up, but the

cowboy spoke to it gently, patted the blunt head and rubbed the welted side. After a moment the nervousness disappeared.

"No, you don't gain nothing by beating a balky horse," Stace told the driver in a reasoning tone. "You could club one plumb to death, and still he wouldn't take the collar. Now you just hold the lines even and see that the two of 'em ease out together. Once you get 'em going this fellow will be all right."

He took hold of the bit and pulled very gently. The horse moved forward. As the collar pressed a little, the body stiffened and shuddered anew. The eyes went a bit wild, but Stace laughed softly and encouraged: "Now just you take her easy. That collar ain't going to bite you. Come on now, let's go. . . . Slap the other one with a line at the right moment, will you, driver?"

Again he pulled gently. The next moment the outfit was moving away. "Now, don't you see how easy that was?" he called.

The driver rammed his head past the fore-bow of the covered wagon and looked back. Once more that mysterious, mocking grin was on his hard face. Suddenly he burst into another guffaw and the head disappeared. Stace could still hear the yapping laughter as the vehicle disappeared over the nearby ground swell.

The cowboy continued to stand there wondering for a moment. The stranger had been equipped like a squatter, but the bowed legs bespoke much saddle service. The team was just a pair of range ponies pressed into wagon service. What did it mean? Who was this strange man? Where was he bound? Stace remembered the look of intense hatred he had seen glare for a moment in the coppery eyes, the way in which the bony right hand crept toward the heavy six-shooter. And that coyote laughter!

An unaccountable sense of uneasiness stirred within his breast. When he rode to the crest of the little swell he saw that the vehicle already was a considerable distance away, and that the stranger was driving his team at a sweeping gallop.

STACE GENTRY came upon that same outfit a week later. It was parked beneath a sturdy oak just beyond his east property line. A tent was stretched near the wagon. The waddy saw that some sod had been broken, and that the mysterious stranger was engaged in building a fence about the field. Quite evidently he had homesteaded down there. Again an unaccountable premonition stirred within the young rancher. He rode slowly to investigate the situation. The cowboy was not carrying a gun, but he found himself wishing that he were.

He had been wondering what kind of reception he would receive, but the squatter greeted him amiably enough as he came up.

"Why, howdy, Stace Gentry. I neglected to interdooce myself t'other day. I'm Harv Clawson. Took me out a homestid here and aim to put in a crop. You shore know a thing or two about balky nags, cowpunch. I ain't had much trouble with that nubbin pony since you showed me how to handle him. He's developin' into a right good work horse."

He had got it all out of his system with a single breath, as if wanting the young rancher to understand the situation at once. Stace's gaze roved over the layout, noting the flimsy, widely spaced posts, the two strands of wire, the single team, the covered wagon and the tent. The whole thing looked rather temporary, and he told Harv Clawson so, but the fellow declared:

"Oh, I aim to stay, all right, unless somebody buys me out. I'm just doin' the best I can for the time bein'."

Stace smiled acridly. "Buy you out? Shucks, Clawson, nobody who knows this country would give you a dime

for this place as a farm site. You can't make a go of dry farming in this country."

"Plenty of rainfall so far this spring, and the almanac prophesies a wet year. I figure I can raise me a crop all right."

"Likely enough you can this year, but what of the next—and the next?"

The other grinned, spat tobacco juice. "I never worry about crossings until I get to 'em."

"You haven't even got camp water on this place. How do you make out?"

"Haul from that little creek a mile away, over on the Bar X range. Got three barrels, one for myself and two for the horses."

"That fence you're building looks mighty flimsy. Ain't you afraid my stock will bust through and get at your crops?"

"Oh, I can keep yore cattle hazed away," the other replied easily.

Stace sensed mockery behind the careless manner. Now and then he glimpsed a fleeting, sardonic smile on the hard face, and once more he wondered.

Abruptly he asked: "Haven't we met before somewhere?"

Clawson stopped tamping in a post and wheeled. Gone was the hint of devilish humor. The eyes were tigerish now, as they had been when Stace had told his name a week ago. The man's right hand moved toward the butt of the heavy Colt. Stace's blood throbbed coldly. He wished again that he were armed. Deliberately Harv Clawson said:

"Nope, you never saw me before we met the day beside the spring—if that's what you mean. I'm from up north. Never been south of the Wyoming line until this trip."

"I thought I saw something familiar in your face," mumbled the cowboy.

Clawson's tension disappeared. The sardonic light returned to his eyes. When finally Stace rode away the cowboy was puzzled and uneasy again.

HARV CLAWSON stuck close to his homestead. Stace Gentry still wondered about his strange neighbor, but the anxiety which he had felt on the man's account had worn away. Clawson's crop sprang up and grew swiftly. Stace had never returned to the farm, but several times from distances he had seen some kind of feedstuff flourishing down there.

Stace lived alone at the ranch which his father had left him. There was not much stock on the small spread, but what he did have was of good quality. Recently he had bought a prize Hereford bull. He meant in time to acquire other registered stock, and thus raise the standard of his herd still higher.

One morning while riding range the young ranchman decided to inspect a certain waterhole. It might be getting low, he thought. As he neared the spring he saw a cow stretched out on the ground. Anxiety seized him, as he pressed forward at a lope.

Yes, the cow was dead, just as he had feared. "One of my finest Herefords," he muttered. "Gosh, I hope it ain't blackleg."

He got down and examined the dead brute, but could not immediately diagnose the cause of death. "Well, I'll save the hide, anyway," he mumbled.

He slit the hide from throat to tail, and then he got another idea. Maybe it was something which the cow had eaten that had caused death. He ripped open the paunch, and instantly the mystery was explained. "Cane!" he blurted, and unconsciously his eyes turned in the direction of the Clawson homestead. As he remembered the fellow's strange actions, the haunting uneasiness returned.

He climbed onto his bronc and galloped to the squatter's place. Gone for the moment was all thought of salvaging the cowhide. As he approached the camp he saw that Clawson had made no improvement there.

The tent and the covered wagon still stood beneath the great oak. There had been no start made on any kind of a house.

He found Harv Clawson loafing in the shade. The cowboy sensed that a visit from him had been expected. Malicious devils were playing in the fellow's eyes as he said: "Why, hello, Gentry. What you doin' down this way?"

Stace did not beat around the bush. "I found one of my cows dead," he stated flatly, "and its belly was full of green cane." He looked away toward the field, where a crop of the stuff stood in luxuriant growth.

"Is that so?" drawled Harv Clawson. "Meanin' what?"

"Maybe you don't know it, since you say you're a stranger to this country, but every range man and farmer in Texas knows that green sorghum-cane is bad medicine for cattle."

"You don't say!"

"Yeah, strange thing, any other kind of stock gets fat on the stuff, but cows—it kills 'em."

"You don't say!" Clawson exclaimed mildly again. "Now that's too bad. I noticed some critters had busted through my fence last night. I hope you don't find no more dead ones."

The cowboy's rugged face hardened. "Clawson," he snapped, "I told you that dinky, spool-thread fence of yours wouldn't keep out cattle."

The other shrugged. "I'm sorry, but it's the best I can afford. As I promised you before, I'll try to keep your stuff hazed away. But, of course, I can't stay up all night guardin' fence."

Young Gentry stared at him coldly, and then declared: "Well, there'd better be no more dead cattle. If there is I'll hold you responsible."

Clawson flared: "And if yore danged cows bust into my field again I'm goin' to hold *you* responsible! You'll either make good, or I'll start guarding the cane with a Winchester!"

Stace glared at him again, then wheeled and rode away. His mouth was set in a grim line. He was thinking once more of Clawson's yapping laughter, the mockery in the hard eyes; the fact that the man had settled adjoining him, built a flimsy fence and then planted only sorghum-cane. Had the fellow for some reason deliberately set about to hurt him? He had a strong feeling that such was the case.

"But why?" he asked himself. "I can't imagine—only, I wonder if that jasper and I did meet somewhere before? His mug stirs my memory. Still, I know of no enemies who'd want to kill off my stock."

Later in the day, circling buzzards guided him to three more dead cows. Once more his face went grim, but he told himself that there was no need going back to the Clawson place. He had already had his say with the squatter. He would watch, and try to guard against a recurrence of the misfortune.

He could not watch the farm both night and day, however. A week later he came upon a little bunch of his stuff that had been in Harv Clawson's cane field. Two were dead, and their paunches were full of the stuff. Another was down, and in a bad way. Four of those which were standing were sick. The rest of the group looked all right.

Stace was furious. He backtrailed the cattle to the place where they had come out of the field. One strand of wire was broken. The other was very loose. Stace had a hunch that Clawson himself had made the break in the line.

At that moment the angular, bigboned nester came out of the dense cane. Cradled in his arms was a Winchester.

Stace Gentry's voice had a hard ring as he accused: "Well, Clawson, it happened again. I found two dead ones this time, and four others may

follow. I told you I'd hold you responsible—"

"And I said I'd hold *you* responsible," the other cut in with savage vehemence. He began cursing, then, claiming that young Gentry's stock had ravaged his field. "I'll start shootin' yore danged cows if they break through again," he threatened.

"You do and I'll start shooting, too, but it won't be at cows," blared Stace. "Why don't you build a real fence? And how come you raise only sorghum? You're deliberately trying to ruin me with this cussed homestead of yours, Clawson! Why, I ask you? Why?"

"I'll run this farm any way I please," the man snarled, "and build as I please, raise whatever I please. Right now I please to raise cane." He had offered no answer to the cowboy's last question.

Stace took in a deep breath, then said in a voice so burdened with anger that it shook: "I'm going to raise cane, too, but not in the same sense that you are. I'll be seeing you again, fellow."

He whirled his bronc and went pounding for home. When he arrived there he flung himself down, walked stiffly into the house and took a gun and belt from a bureau drawer. He buckled on the Colt, then went back to his mount. "I'll show that jasper something," he muttered. "He's going to fix that fence or else."

ON the way back to the Clawson homestead the waddy began to reason more calmly: "If I go storming back down there with a war bonnet on, there may be a killing. I'd better go to the sheriff with the matter. First, though, I'll have a cool talk with that hombre, and see if I can get him to lay out his cards."

He circled through the scrub timber, eyeing the field from all sides, and then headed for the camp. A hundred yards from it he whirled into a thicket. From concealment there he watched something which made his eyes bug.

Standing before his tent, Harv Clawson was engaged in pistol practice. Crouching, bending, weaving, leaping aside—he was drawing and reholstering his six-shooter. The movements of his body were panther-ish, those of his right hand were lightning fast. A chill went through Stace Gentry as he realized what would have happened to him if he hadn't used reason. "If I had come faunching down here and tied into that gunman I wouldn't have had a chance," he told himself.

Stace had plenty of courage, and he was a good shot, but he had never found any occasion for practicing the quick-draw. A cold prickling went along his spine as he concluded that the mysterious squatter probably was limbering up for him. The cowboy was not deterred in his purpose, though. His square jaw set hard. He would go ahead and have a showdown with Clawson. He did not want Clawson to know that he had witnessed him at gun practice, however, so he again circled through the scrub timber.

Clawson had heard the approaching hoofbeats and he was waiting in front of the covered wagon as Stace came riding up. The chunky, square-jawed puncher drew rein and for a moment they looked at each other in silence.

Then Clawson prompted harshly: "Well?"

Once more Stace Gentry came straight to the point: "Fellow, your game here is to a certain end. What's the payoff? You might as well tell me right now as later."

Clawson apparently was slightly taken aback by the bluntness of the words. Slowly he said, the while his right hand hovered close to the butt of his six-gun: "The only game I've got is to stay right here and raise cane, unless somebody buys me out."

Stace's eyes hardened. "I get it," he said coldly. "You figure to raise

sorghum and kill off my cattle until I pay you to leave." Rage was beginning to boil up within him again.

Clawson shrugged. "Figure it any way you like, but I'm stayin', and raisin' sorghum-cane. I don't aim to put in any more time repairin' fence your cows have busted. I reckon the law can't hold me responsible if they get into my field and kill themselves eatin' that horse feed I'm growin'."

Stace was a little white around the lips, but he managed to say quietly: "Since the Bar X stuff seldom wanders this side of yonder line of cliffs, your campaign is all against me. Now I know why you wolf-laughed that day when I introduced myself. It struck you as funny that you'd had such a run-in with the very fellow you'd come here to blackmail. Why did you pick on me, Clawson? What've you got against me, anyway?"

For just a few seconds the sunken eyes glowed with an unholy light, and then slowly the sardonic grin appeared. "You got me all wrong, cowboy," he said. "I'm just a farmer."

"How much do you want to pull stakes and get out?"

The other answered with an alacrity which showed that he was prepared for the question: "I'll sell for a couple thousand. If you ain't got the ready cash I'll take good stock."

Stace laughed a bit wildly. "Now ain't you generous? Why, this whole layout, crop and all, ain't worth more than two hundred bucks. The homestead ain't even yours to sell yet."

The other shrugged, mumbled doggedly: "I like it here, and expect to do right well, but I would sell my right for two thousand dollars."

"I won't pay you a dime, ever," Stace told him hotly. "I only asked your price to find out what you had on your mind. You're crazy with the heat if you think you can put over such a blackmail scheme."

There was a determined ring in the young ranchman's voice. It caused Clawson's mouth to flatten over his teeth, and droop at the corners. The shine in his metallic eyes now looked like one of baffled rage.

He growled: "I didn't ask you to buy me out. You wanted to know my price and I told you. I'm plumb contented to stay here and raise sorghum. I'll keep new batches comin' along all the time, so that as fast as one ripens and has to be harvested another will be comin' into prime. In this climate I ought to be able to raise the stuff nearly all the year around."

"You can't get away with it," Stace ground out furiously.

"The heck I can't," the squatter bleated. "You come down here and try to stop me and I'll shoot the buttons off your clothes. Now git, before I lose my temper."

Stace sat there, trembling with anger in his saddle for a moment, and glaring. His fingers were itching to snatch the holstered Colt at his side, despite the gun practice he had witnessed, but an inner voice was urging him to do nothing rash, to go to the sheriff with his problem. Stace Gentry always had been a law-abiding citizen, so he whirled his bronc and went fogging away toward town. Behind him sounded the coyoke laughter of Harv Clawson.

"Damn that buzzard," the waddy gritted. "If the sheriff don't figure some way to oust him I will!"

SHERIFF JIM LAKE rode back with Stace to the Clawson homestead. The grizzled officer had told the cowboy: "I'll reason with the feller, and try to bluff him, but if he stands pat there's nothing the law can do."

Harv Clawson looked furtive and uneasy when the sheriff rode up to the camp in company with Stace Gentry. Soon, however, the fellow gained courage; became insolent, sneering.

To the officer's reasoning he replied: "Like I told Gentry, I put up the best fence I'm able. If his cows get into my cane, that's their fault—

and his. It's me who's entitled to call on the law for protection, who ought to sue for damages."

Jim Lake bluffed, threatened. Finally he said: "I've heard of ranchers squeezin' out nesters, forcin' them to sell their farms for a lot less than the lands were worth, but doggoned if this ain't something new. A squatter tryin' to run a high-handed sandy on a ranchman. It's plain blackmail, Clawson, and you can't get away with it. I won't let you. I'll run you in."

Harv Clawson said flatly: "I'm plumb within my rights. This here is a free country. I took up a homestead all regular and legal—built me a fence, raised me a crop. I got time yet within which to put up a shack. There's no law which requires me to fence my cane a-tall if I don't want to. You can't run me in, sheriff, because I ain't done a thing illegal, and I don't aim to."

A short time later, as Stace Gentry and Jim Lake were riding away from the place, the sheriff remarked sourly: "A pretty smart hombre—smart and dangerous. I don't like that face of his, none whatever."

"He's a hard one all right," Stace agreed. "Not the usual squatter by any means. Notice how his legs are bowed? And I've told you how he can handle a gun; likewise that them two ponies weren't collar-marked the first time I saw them." He frowned, then, and added abstractedly: "I don't know why his face seems vaguely familiar. Haven't any idea why I've seen hate shining in his eyes at times, and can't figger the reason for pickin' me as his blackmail victim."

"I don't see how I'm goin' to help you, Stace. Like he says, he's entirely within the law."

The waddy's rugged face hardened. "Then I'll have to deal with him all by myself, in my own way."

The sheriff warned earnestly: "You be mighty careful, Stace Gentry. If you took gun trouble to that homestead he could kill you and clear himself with a claim of self-defense."

"But doggonit, what am I to do? It's a cinch I'm not going to buy off that wolf. Neither am I going to stand for his killing my cows."

The sheriff wagged his grizzled head worriedly. "You could fence your own range," he suggested doubtfully.

Stace Gentry's lips twisted bitterly. "I'd have to fence it all around to keep my stock from going down there. That would take money and time. Meanwhile my cows would go on dying. Naw, sheriff, there has got to be another way to beat that fellow's game."

"Just keep your stuff hazed away from there temporarily, and I'll see if I can think up somethin'."

Once more Stace could not guard his cattle day and night, however, and so the very next day came a spark which set off the dynamite that was within Stace Gentry.

AT dawn next morning Stace Gentry was on a hilltop overlooking the Clawson homestead. He was relieved at finding none of his stock on that part of the range. Shortly after sunup, however, he found a small bunch of his stuff heading toward Clawson's place. He turned them back and drove them deep into the hills.

Near noontime as he was riding range, again not far from the cane farm, he saw four coyotes break out of a wooded draw. They stopped on a ground swell, looked back at him sulkily, and then wishfully into the draw. The next moment they dropped out of sight behind the ridge. Premonition was mounting within the waddy as he rode down the slope.

His face went pale at what he discovered. Stretched on the ground dead, was his prize bull. The coyotes had been feasting there.

For a minute Stace Gentry was too stricken to move. He just sat his saddle like a wooden man, staring. When finally he did swing to the

ground he was like a person dazed. Stiffly he strode to the carcass and stood there, gazing again.

He guessed that the animal had died early in the night, or perhaps late in the day before. He got down and slit open the paunch. "It was cane all right," he muttered.

His eyes burned in his head. His square jaws were clamped so hard that they ached. He felt that he had suffered disaster, that the housework of his ranching plans was collapsing about him. And then rage came swelling up in an ungovernable tide. He lurched to his feet, strode to his bronc, flung himself into the saddle and went pounding toward the Clawson homestead. He was telling himself that he could not hope to regain any part of his losses, but that he would at least have it out with that mysterious fellow, Harv Clawson.

This time his fury did not abate as he rode. Rather did it increase. As he galloped up to the camp his brain was hot and there was a humming inside his skull. Regardless of Clawson's prowess with a six-gun, Stace was determined to shoot it out with the man.

Harv Clawson was standing spread-legged near the wagon, waiting, ready as the cowboy fogged to a stop. Stace flung himself down and for a few tense seconds he and the squatter just glared at each other. Clawson's face was hard and mean. The mouth drooped at the corners. He could see that the young rancher was on the warpath this time, and he was prepared for gun trouble.

Stace's voice was low and strained as he said: "It was my prize bull this time."

Clawson continued to wait, and stare unwinkingly. Stace knew that there would be no backing up, that it was a shoot-out. Again the shine in the coppery eyes was one of fierce hatred and deadly intent. The cowboy wished fleetingly that he were better trained for the gunfight, wished that he was a Coltman like his father.

Thought of his dad spurred his memory, and suddenly—*he knew!* That vaguely familiar something in Clawson's hard face—now he understood. It all blazed vividly before the eyes of his memory. Fourteen years ago—Stace's father had been a ranger then. They had lived down in the Hellgap country. One night Pat Gentry had brought in an outlaw, Heck Larson.

As the desperado was being shoved into a cell he had dashed out a light which the jailer had held, and in the confusion had escaped. Stace, a ten year old kid then, had been on his way to the general store. He alone had seen the bandit dive beneath a tiny culvert in the board walkway. Had it not been for the youngster the outlaw probably would not have been found by the swarming searchers, and eventually would have got away. Stace had screamed the news, however, and the outlaw had been recaptured.

Yes, the cowboy understood now—the familiar something, the murderous hatred, everything.

He blurted: "Heck Larson! I was just a younker then. Time has changed your looks; besides, you've growed a beard. At last I've got you pegged, though."

The ugly visage had stiffened. The nostrils of the long, flat nose were tense and pale. The man bit out in a deadly tone: "You guessed it. I didn't figure you would; didn't think anybody would, up in this country, after I'd knocked off your old man. I swore revenge against you both, and after I escaped from the pen I set out to git Pat Gentry. When I heard he was dead and that you was runnin' a nice little spread lone-handed, I got the idea for raisin' cane."

"Well, your hand is played out, fellow. I'm going to the sheriff and—"

He dived sidewise, for he had seen cold-blooded murder in the coppery eyes, the flick of a hand toward a gun butt. The weapon crashed, and Stace felt the slug burn across the muscle of his left shoulder.

Stace had started a hand driving frantically for his own gun. But before he could jerk the Colt clear of leather and tilt up the muzzle, the outlaw's forty-five had roared again. The bullet slashed across his ribs.

Stace fired, just as he struck the ground. It would have been a miss had Larson, alias Clawson, stood still. The man had taken a catlike leap to the left, however, and for once this gunfighter's trick went against him. He got squarely in front of the waddy's slug.

The heavy ball of lead slammed into his chest. Abruptly he dropped his gun. Momentum carried him stumbling for three paces. His bearded jaw was slack and the reddish eyes were staring wildly; then he hit the ground. The outthrust arms crumpled. like rubber. His chin struck the earth and his head bounced. The next moment he was lying there very still.

Stace got up and gazed at the grotesque form. The cowboy was pale, and he felt suddenly weak. A pattering of hoofs brought him out of his daze of horror. He turned and saw Sheriff Jim Lake galloping up.

Stace told his story simply, truthfully. Lake nodded and said, while looking at the body: "Yeh, I was notified of Heck Larson's escape, some time back. I never figured he might come to these parts, though, and since I wasn't furnished with a picture of him, I didn't suspect this hombre."

"Well, his blackmail scheme is ended," mumbled Stace, "but his death don't bring back what I've lost. Some of my finest cows were killed with his cane, and the loss of that prize bull I put so much money into hurts the little ranch powerfully."

The sheriff smiled acridly. "I reckon there is such a thing as poetic justice, after all," he remarked.

Stace glanced at him puzzledly: "Huh? Meaning what?"

"Heck Larson rode wild after his escape from the pen—killin', robbin'. There was a heavy reward offered for him, dead or alive. Well, the bounty belongs to you, Stace. You can take it and buy yourself some new breeder stock."

State Gentry sighed with relief and remarked: "Life sure has got some queer angles."

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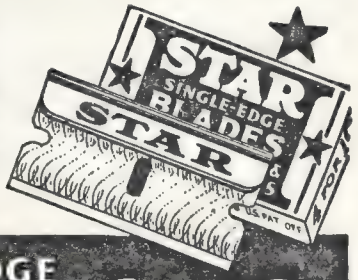

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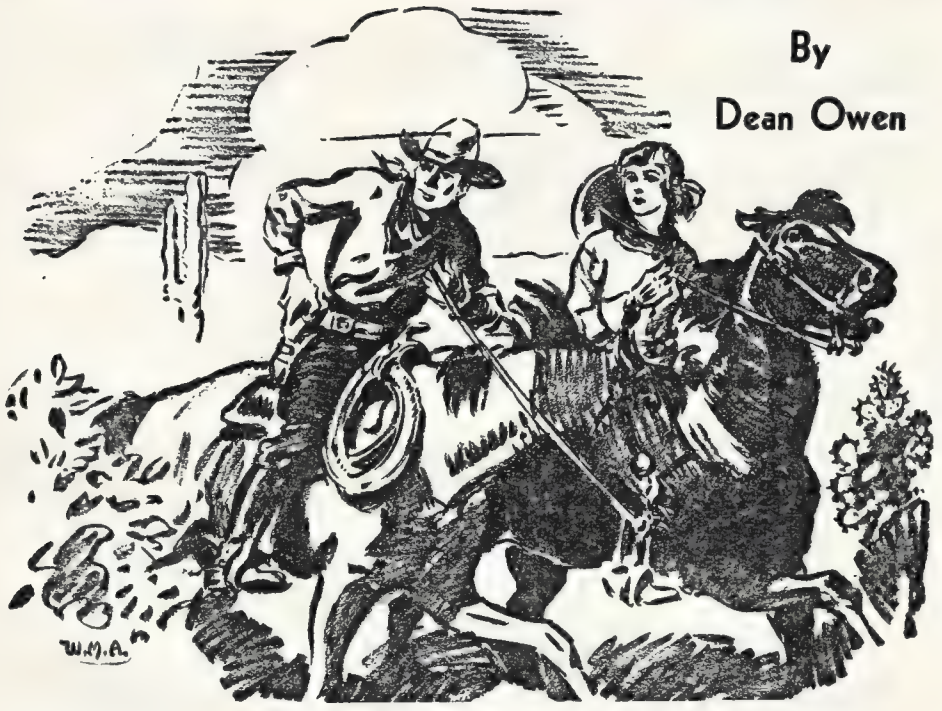
FOR GEM AND EVER-READY RAZORS

Owl-Hooter's Gun Code

Honor, like gold, is where you find it. So Phil Pardy learned, when he probed the gun codes of a bronc-busting amigo and a badlands owl-hooter.

By Dean Owen



FOLKS in Blackwater called it hero worship. Phil Pardy gave it no name. He only knew that Jim Noyes was the greatest man in Crescent Valley. After a year, Jim was coming home.

Phil stood tense, expectant, by the adobe wall of the Blackwater stage depot. His probing eyes lanced through the curtaining shadows of evening, picked out the swirling dust plume far up the road.

"Here comes the stage!" he sang out to the ring of loafers who lounged about the depot. "Jim Noyes is on 'er! The best man an' the best rider Crescent Valley ever weaned!"

"A yellow snake!" The voice was low, heavy with hate.

Phil Pardy whirled. His right hand snapped to his gun. His blue eyes chilled, his gaze smacking into the faces of the crowd. "Who said that?"

Silence, with only the rattle of the approaching stage audible.

"Not me," spoke up one man nervously. "I know better'n to say anything against Jim Noyes with you around."

Phil moved through the crowd. He

reached a corner of the depot. He saw only a packing box and an old rain barrel in the gloom.

"That voice come from over here," he ripped out.

He was short, pug-nosed. The baking desert sun had burned his skin till it was a glistening, Apache red. Trail dust shook from his old clothes as he moved.

With a clatter and a bang, the stage from Crescent City rolled into the depot at Blackwater. But Phil was watching the big man with the wide shoulders, moving slowly up the street toward the Big Dipper saloon. He wore a single gun. His back was broad.

"That's the gent," Phil muttered. "I'll remember that white hat with the fancy band."

A heavy hand clapped on Phil Pardy's shoulder. He whirled. Faced a tall, dark man, whose dancing black eyes looked out from beneath the brim of a black hat.

"Jim!" cried Phil. "You ol' son."

"You're homely as ever, you mud hen!" Jim boomed. "First time I see you in a year an' you got your back to me when I roll in."

Phil grinned. He decided to say nothing about the stranger in the white hat. Phil was conscious of his own shabby appearance as he stepped back and surveyed Jim. Jim's outfit was black, expensive coat, trousers stuck into the tops of handmade boots. A dash of silver here and there. He wore no gun.

The men at the depot packed around Jim, calling greetings and slapping him on the back. Jim strutted a little proudly and held up his hand.

"Boys, plant your feet in the sawdust at the Big Dipper. The drinks is on me." The crowd whooped, raced for the false-fronted saloon building up the street. Jim flipped a coin to a Mexican. "Take my warbag to the hotel."

Arm in arm, the two men sauntered off down the boardwalk, the chime of dragging spurs in their wake. The best bronc rider and the best shot in Crescent Valley. That's what the loafers on the hotel porch said as they watched the two march past.

"Still think I'm pretty good, eh, Phil?" Jim turned to the shorter man.

"Ever since you pulled me out of the quicksand at Steer Crossin' I've thought so. I was just a kid then, but I don't forget."

Jim snapped his fingers suddenly. "Where's Madge?"

"She's waitin' at the hotel." Phil's voice was heavy.

Madge Barnham. Phil had been raised with the girl on the Tin Cup spread. Since Thad Barnham had died a year before, Phil had run the ranch for Madge. Thad always wanted Phil and Madge to get married. But Madge was in love with Jim Noyes. One consolation. She was getting a great fellow in Jim Noyes.

THEY neared the front of the Big Dipper saloon. Bugs swarmed around a kerosene lamp over the door. The entrance was deserted. Deserted except for a big man in a white hat who lounged against the hitchrack. He had long black hair, gray at the temples. His big hat was pushed back. Gray eyes—hard, piercing—lanced into Jim Noyes' features. His voice cut sharply.

"Hello, Martin." He addressed the chilled greeting to Jim. Jim seemed not to hear, quickened his step.

Phil remembered the white hat he had seen near the depot and stiffened. This was Jim's argument now, Phil reasoned. He'd settle with the fellow later. They were slightly past the big man now.

"Ain't run acrost you for months, Martin," the big man snapped again.

Jim could not ignore the man now. He turned, and Phil saw that his face was drawn, white. "I don't know you," Jim said with an effort.

The big man laughed. There was a strange light in his gray eyes as they

stabbed into Jim's features. Phil saw the big gun on the man's thigh. Somewhere back in his mind he had heard of that gun, with the silver Indian head on the butt, and the big dark man who carried it. But his mind was more concerned with the present now.

The long-haired man stepped to the edge of the boardwalk.

"I know your name ain't Martin. But you was usin' that over in Benton. *You* know what I'm talkin' about."

Jim Noyes stood stiff. The muscles in his lean jaw were ridged. He seemed to be fighting for self-control. "I don't know you, stranger. I—"

"There's a little blonde gal over in Benton. Seems like she married this Martin feller. She told me if I ever run into him to persuade him to come back. I said I'd persuade him to go some place. I'm thinkin' the little lady will be better off without this Martin feller."

Phil started to say something, then decided not to butt in now. This big man was plenty mistaken. Jim never did a low-down thing in his life. Phil must have faith in Jim when he'd give up Madge Barnham, just so Jim could marry her. No, this gent was loco.

"What's this got to do with me?" said Jim with a snarl, unable to check his temper.

"I called you a yellow snake at the depot before you'd even got in," said the big man. "I'm callin' you again. I'll give you a break for your gun."

"Wait!" cried Jim. "See—look—I ain't wearin' a gun."

The big man grunted. "Too bad. Another time."

"Now," Phil Pardy snapped. "You've insulted Jim Noyes. He's my best friend. He ain't wearin' a gun—I am!"

The big man looked at Phil for the first time. A slow smile twisted the corners of his mouth. He had a tired, weary look about his features. He shook his head when he saw this kid with the hot blue eyes, yellow hair that crept from beneath his hat. Compact, hard, this kid.

"This ain't your fight—"

"I'm makin' it mine."

They both went for their guns together. The long-haired man stepped back, brought up that Indian-head gun. There were two blasts. Phil saw the big man lurch back as a bullet smacked into the kerosene lamp over the saloon door. The big man had lost his balance on the edge of the boardwalk. Now he lay stunned in the street, blood oozing from a hole in his shoulder.

Jim Noyes was at Phil's side, looking incredibly from the fallen man to his friend. Phil shrugged his shoulders. "I could have killed him." He holstered his gun.

Men poured out of the saloon. Windows in the hotel across the street popped open. Somebody shouted. Phil followed Jim across the street into the hotel lobby. From the window he saw five gun-hung men ride up to take charge of the fallen man.

A girl rushed up to them. Her brown eyes were wide. The overhead lamp caught the coppery streaks in her hair. She was pretty, Madge Barnham.

"What happened?" she cried.

"Madge, honey." Jim Noyes folded her in his arms, pressed her close.

Pain crushed Phil Pardy's heart as he saw Madge cling to Jim. The softness of her lips, the curves of her young body sent the blood spinning through Phil's veins.

"Listen," Jim was talking. "Phil's got to leave town. Right away."

"Why?" asked Phil surprised.

"You just shot Big Mike Yule. He'll never rest till he settles with you."

Phil was stunned. Big Mike Yule. He had actually downed the notorious gunman. An almost legendary figure, Yule traveled the trails of the Southwest. At one town a marshal, the next holding up banks, stages. An owl-hooter with a code of honor, men said. His Indian-head gun had spelled

death for every man who had ever faced it—except Phil Pardy. The victory had been an accident.

"I reckon you paid me back for savin' your life years ago," said Jim solemnly. He had recovered his composure. "You're a man now, Phil. You can take care of yourself."

Phil watched Madge turn to him, her brown eyes suddenly misted. "Don't—don't let anything happen to you, Phil. Jim and I don't want to lose our best man for our wedding."

AFTER a week, Phil relaxed his vigilance. Big Mike Yule had not shown up at the Tin Cup ranch. Phil rode the range with the rest of the hands, riding fence, branding, doing the thousand and one jobs on a big ranch.

Every day Phil watched Madge and Jim ride together across the mesquite-dotted range. The sight of them laughing, happy, did strange things to his heart.

For months Phil had known that Madge was in love with Jim. At first he hadn't cared. Then Jim left. Been gone a year. In that time, Phil realized that Madge meant more to him than just a crazy kid in pigtails who could ride a horse and cuss as well as anyone on the ranch. Motherless, the girl had grown up among hard men, had faced the struggles of ranch life since she was a baby. The death of her father had shifted the burden to Phil Pardy's shoulders.

Phil was down in the south pasture mending a fence when he heard the rattle of hoofs. He straightened, hand on his gun. Out of the dust haze two riders appeared. He recognized Jim, riding easily in the saddle, an arrogant carriage to his body. Wind whipped Madge's brown curls. They brought their horses to a halt.

"Still workin', eh?" Jim laughed.

Phil nodded, tried desperately not to show that he cared for Madge. He'd leave, head for the border as soon as they were married.

"Don't be downhearted, Phil," Madge said. "Some nice girl will come along. Then we can come to your wedding."

"Can't tell about weddings." Jim's voice carried an undertone of sarcasm. "Madge, here, might turn me down. Turn me down for you, Phil." He gave a short laugh and looked at the girl.

Phil stiffened, watched Jim carefully brushing dust from his fancy clothes. He saw that Madge's tanned cheeks were tinged with red. She leaned forward, as if actually seeing Phil for the first time.

"Why, Phil has been like a brother—" She bit her lip, started to say something, then whirled her horse and dashed toward the ranch house. Jim slapped his boot top with his quirt, looked hard at Phil and followed the girl.

Phil watched their figures recede in the distance. He felt vaguely disturbed. Phil wondered if Jim suspected he was in love with Madge. Then he fell to thinking of Big Mike Yule's words that night in Blackwater. Something about Jim being tied up with a blonde girl in Benton. Phil cursed himself. Yule was wrong. Jim was the squarest man in Crescent Valley, he reassured himself.

For three days, Phil avoided Madge and Jim. One hot, sultry afternoon, Phil drove into Blackwater with the buckboard. They needed supplies at the ranch. He racked the team in front of the general store. The little street was almost deserted. Phil pulled a list of the stuff he needed from his pocket, walked into the store and handed it to the clerk.

The bald-headed clerk scratched his head as he glanced at the list.

"Seen Jim Noyes today?"

"No." Phil started for the door, then turned. "What made you ask?"

"Oh, nothin'. Only the boys is sayin' he is kinda on the ragged edge."

"Meanin' Jim's legs can't carry the load he's got in his belly. He's over at the Big Dipper."

Phil grunted, made for the door

and walked rapidly along the boardwalk. He had not failed to notice the contempt in the clerk's voice at mention of Jim's name. Phil was troubled. No one was on the street. He shoved through the doors of the Big Dipper and walked to the bar. It was midday. The place was empty.

"Where's Jim Noyes?" he asked the barkeep.

The man jerked a thumb toward the rear.

PHIL walked toward a shadowy corner. Jim sat with his head slumped across a green-topped poker table. An empty bottle was at his elbow. Phil reached Jim, jerked his head up, shook him violently. Jim's bloodshot eyes flipped open. His mouth hung loosely open.

"Lemme be. I wanna—" He swayed, squinted one eye. "Thash you, Phil. I gotta meet Madge— Don' let anybody get me—"

Phil released his hold. Jim's head flopped back on the table top. Phil turned to the barkeep.

"What set him off?"

"He was havin' a drink when somebody said they seen Big Mike Yule in town. Jim grabs a quart of Old Crow, heads for that table and downs'er." The barkeep polished a glass. "Our champ bronc buster seems to have a champ yellow streak."

"That's enough." Phil's v o i c e ripped through the big room. His blue eyes burned into the barkeep's face. The man muttered something and turned away.

Phil had to work fast. He couldn't let Madge see Jim like this. He started to lift him up when he heard the scuffle of boots on the floor. Phil turned. His blood ran to ice. His heart boomed in his ears. Just inside the door stood Big Mike Yule. Five gunmen backed him up. Yule's arm was still in a sling.

"Hello, kid." Yule's voice was not unkind as he addressed Phil. "One of my men seen you come in."

Phil moved away from the table. If he had to face Yule now, he wanted plenty of room. He tensed his body. Six against one. He saw the barkeep, face white, standing with a towel in his hand. Yule raised his hand.

"We ain't meetin' today, kid. I just want to warn you. You're the first man ever to beat me. When I'm well enough, we'll fight it out. It's got to be one of us. Otherwise men'll say Big Mike is slippin'. Every gun-hungry hombre in the Southwest will be tryin' to lift my hair. Sabe?"

"I reckon I know what you mean." Phil relaxed, his lips pressed into a grim smile.

Yule looked at Jim, spilled half on the poker table. He pointed a finger. "Seems there's easier ways of killin' a man than shootin' him." He laughed. With his five men at his heels, Big Mike Yule walked out of the saloon.

The barkeep mopped sweat from his forehead. "Listen, Pardy. You stay outa the Big Dipper till you an' Yule settle. I don't want this place shot up."

Phil didn't answer. He threw Jim over his shoulder, carried him out the back door. He made the rear entrance of the Blackwater hotel. Quickly he got a room and tossed Jim onto the bed, fully clothed.

"He can sleep it off," he muttered, locking the door.

Phil reached the front porch of the hotel just as Madge Barnham rode up. His heart jumped queerly at sight of her trim figure. Her brown curls showed from beneath the brim of an old hat. She saw Phil.

"I was to meet Jim here. Have you seen him?"

Forcing a smile to his lips, Phil reached her side. He hated to lie. "Jim took the stage for Crescent City. Some urgent business came up. He'll tell you about it when he comes back."

M a d g e showed disappointment. Phil laughed. "Don't worry. I got the buckboard. Tie your bronc behind

and we'll ride to the Tin Cup together."

The girl's eyes lighted up. She smiled. And as Phil walked toward the buckboard, he saw Big Mike Yule standing under the wooden awning of the saddle shop across the street. Sooner or later it must come—guns and death.

TWO weeks rolled by. Phil was heading for the corrals by the big barn when he saw Jim ride into the ranch yard. Phil noted his drawn, haggard face. His bloodshot eyes. A twinge of pity swept over him. Jim had changed. He rode up to Phil, dismounted.

"I just come from town. Yule's lookin' for us. He ain't wearin' his arm in a sling no more." His voice held a note of desperation. "Think of Madge. There'll never be any happiness for her until Big Mike is dead. Yule will get me first, then you. You're the best with a gun. I'm rotten. If you could get Yule—"

Phil turned toward the rolling rangeland which stretched toward the purple hills. He spoke without looking at Jim.

"If I face Yule, we'll both die. You won't have to worry."

With those words, he continued toward the corral. Somehow he couldn't face Jim again. Something had gone out of the man. Like pricking a bubble with a pin. He wondered if Jim had always been like this.

"Wonder if I've been blind all these years," he muttered. "Maybe I'm seein' him as he really is."

It was hours later. Phil was running a bunch of horses into the lower pasture when he saw Jim and Madge ride off toward the foothills. Jim rode a little behind. He was talking, gesturing, but Phil couldn't hear the words. He kept out of sight.

As Phil watched them disappear, he wondered if he had repaid Jim for having saved his life so long ago. After all, pulling a man from the sucking quicksand of Steer Crossing wasn't such a marvelous feat. One thing was certain. Madge loved Jim. Maybe if Yule was dead, Jim would be his old self again. Phil drew his big gun from its holster, weighed it carefully in his hand. Yes, he would have to kill Big Mike or be killed. That would repay Jim Noyes and be cheap insurance for Madge's happiness.

It was late afternoon when Phil caught sight of the riderless horse jogging across the sand flats. He squinted his eyes against the gun glare. A whistle of surprise escaped his lips. That roan! It was the horse Madge had been riding when she left with Jim!

With his heart drumming wildly in his breast, Phil spurred his horse to a gallop. The roan tossed its head and nickered at sight of Phil's mount. Phil drew alongside the sweaty animal, grabbed the bridle reins.

"Lord, what's happened?" He said the words slowly, heavily. Could Madge have been thrown? She was an expert rider. Where was Jim? These questions flashed through Phil's mind.

Suddenly the drum of hoofs on the ground caused him to jerk around in the saddle. Every nerve keyed, he dropped a hand to his gun. Out of the curtain of dust emerged Jim Noyes. His hat was gone. His eyes were wild. He cried out when he spotted Phil.

"Madge! Have you seen her?" Jim came to a sliding halt.

"No! Where is she? She rode off with you." Phil spurred close, gripped Jim's arm until the handsome man winced.

"We had a quarrel. Madge rode off. I lost track of her. Her horse must have thrown her some place up there."

Phil swore. "Why did you leave? Why didn't you try and find her?"

Jim wiped sweat from his forehead. He laid a hand on the stock of his saddle gun. "Yule's up there. He's holed up in them hills. If he finds me, he'll kill me. Let's ride to Black-

water. Organize a posse. We can comb the hills for Madge. If we run into Big Mike or his crew, we can kill 'em."

"No time for that," Phil said slowly, his blue eyes lancing into Jim's twitching features. "You ran off. Left Madge. Because you were afraid. I wonder if what Yule said about you is true?"

Jim's face went white. "I'm keyed up, Phil. I shouldn't have left Madge. Let's ride. We'll find her."

Without a word, Phil slapped the riderless roan on the rump with his quirt. The horse would return to the ranch. Then he and Jim began the task of back-tracking the trail of Madge's pony.

For a solid hour they rode. At the foot of the low hills, they lost the trail over a lava bed.

"We'll separate," Phil announced. "You go through Horse Canyon. I'll go this way. If either one finds her, fire three shots. We'll meet at the line cabin."

Jim didn't look back, but spurred his horse and disappeared around a bend in the trail. Phil rode straight up the canyon, leaving no possible sign unread. Could Madge have been picked up by Big Mike Yule and some of his gang? The thought left him cold. And yet Yule, in spite of his devilish reputation, didn't seem the kind who would pick on a woman.

SHADOWS were slanting across the red walls of the canyon when he found the spot in the trail where a horse had stumbled and fallen. The trail was slippery here. A tiny stream of water washed over the rocks, covering them with greenish moss. Phil's own mount slipped, but expert rider that he was, he spurred the horse quickly to solid ground.

Phil leaned over in the saddle. He could see broken brush where a body had struck. This was the place Madge had been thrown. The fall had probably stunned her momentarily, allowing her horse time to get away. At the top of the canyon was the Tin Cup line cabin. Madge could have made it up there. With a lighter heart, Phil roweled his spurs and urged his horse up the trail. Yes, there was the imprint of a small boot in the soft dirt beside the trail.

A few minutes later, Phil barged over the rise and saw the outlines of the cabin. The track led right up to the door. For a moment Phil halted in the saddle, watching the cabin. No one seemed around. He galloped straight to the door.

The door was flung open and Madge stood outlined in the doorway. There was a small gun in her hand. Her face was white, but a defiant gleam burned in her eyes. Then she saw Phil. Color flooded back into her cheeks.

"Phil! It's you! I'm so glad!"

Phil was out of the saddle. And for the first time in his life, his arms were around the girl. He was holding her soft body close to his own.

"I knew you'd come, Phil," she whispered. "My horse threw me. It was getting dark. I walked here. I knew *you'd* find me."

Her body trembled. Phil knew she was crying. Women were funny, he told himself. Here she was engaged to Jim and crying for joy that Phil had been the one to find her. But then Jim had said they had a fight. A fight— Phil wondered. But he had no time to wonder further. A cold voice cut through the air.

"Up with your hands!"

Phil stiffened. With one move he flung Madge aside and started to whirl.

"Don't move, kid. You're covered. Don't risk the gal's life."

That cool, calm voice was all that halted Phil from dragging his gun. He looked toward the fringe of trees. Big Mike Yule stood there in the half shadows—big, powerful Mike Yule. Yule held no gun, but the five men with him held naked weapons in their hands, the muzzles trained on Phil.

Madge stepped to Phil's side. "It's

Yule. Oh, Phil, just when I'd found you. Don't let him take you away from me."

Phil didn't answer. Her words sent his heart crashing against his breast. He didn't dare believe his ears. Madge loved him.

But his eyes watched Big Mike Yule, walking slowly forward. Noted the utter calm of the big man. A killing machine. Like hound dogs, his men followed at his heels, steady guns held ready. Vaguely Phil wondered about Jim. Where was he? But Jim was yellow. He wouldn't come now.

Yule halted in front of Phil. "Kid, I reckon this is where we settle."

Phil scowled. "It ain't me I'm thinkin' of. It's Madge. What about her?"

Yule smiled. Glanced from Madge with her frightened eyes, to this stocky, broad-shouldered kid. "If you win, the girl goes back with you. If I win—" he shrugged his heavy shoulders— "the girl gets a safe escort to her ranch."

"How do I know you won't trick me?" snapped Phil.

"I give my word. That, kid, is better bond than money can buy."

Somehow, Phil knew the big man would not lie. Whatever Mike Yule was, road agent, rustler, gunman, he still had a code of honor.

Madge held onto Phil's sleeve. "But I love you, Phil. You—not Jim. I didn't know till today. Yes, I did. I've always known it." Her chin quivered. Tears streamed across her tanned cheeks. "I won't let you go, Phil."

But Phil pushed her slowly away. He felt very calm, almost cold, as if he were another person on a high pinnacle, watching this drama from afar.

"It's the only way, Madge." He turned to Yule. "How about your men? If I win, I've still got to deal with them."

For an answer, Yule turned to his gunmen. "Ride down to the fork in the trail. You can see what's goin' on from down there."

Without a question the men turned their horses and moved up the trail. For seconds the hoofbeats of their mounts rattled fainter and fainter until they were lost altogether in the silence.

Yule stepped into the cabin, searched it for guns. He pulled Madge's gun from her belt, tossed it into a corner. "We'll lock the gal inside."

It was the safest place. Phil quickly led the girl into the cabin, shut the door and stuck a peg through the hasp. Then he faced Yule.

"Down here," said Big Mike softly.

HE turned his back on the kid and walked down the hill. He reached a level spot. Yule bent over, stuck a splinter of pine wood into the ground. He scratched a match and lit the wood. It sputtered, flared, then flamed. It had been dipped in kerosene.

Yule straightened. "When that burns out, we go for our guns."

Phil wet his lips with his tongue, nodded. They separated and waited. An oppressive silence hung over the hills. Phil watched that tiny yellow flaming stick. When that fire went out he might die. Now that he had Madge he wanted to live.

A sudden urge to beg Big Mike for his life, surged over the kid. Then he steeled himself. Mike was old, but he was fast with a gun. Once Phil had faced Yule and come away alive. But Yule had slipped that day. In seconds, Phil's life might be smashed from him.

The flame flickered, nearly went out, but it caught a fresh hold and continued burning. Phil knew there was sweat on his forehead. He tried to relax. His muscles must not be tight. Every split second counted as he faced Big Mike Yule.

The fire glowed fainter and fainter. Phil flexed his fingers. Then the tiny spot of flame died. Phil's hand dived gunward. His weapon was half out of its holster. He fully expected

to feel Yule's lead rip into his body.

Then Phil stiffened, halted his draw. Big Mike was rocking back on his heels, roaring with laughter. He straightened, looked at Phil.

"Kid, you're game. You're the gamest man I ever faced. Take your gal. Git out of here. I'm glad you got her—not that skunk that calls himself Jim Noyes."

Mechanically Phil went to the cabin, unfastened the door. Yule's voice came to him as Madge rushed into his arms.

"That blond gal over in Benton was my daughter, kid. Noyes married her, run off—"

Big Mike lurched as the crack of a rifle smacked the stillness. Phil saw the puff of smoke behind the rock. Saw Big Mike lying there on his back in the dirt. Madge screamed.

Phil's gun was in his hand, the hammer eared back. From that boulder stepped Jim Noyes, smoking rifle held in his hand. He eyed Yule stiff and still. His face was white.

"I got him," he choked. "I got Mike Yule." He looked at Phil. "Bring Madge. Let's get out of here!"

Phil stood anchored to the ground. Slowly his gun muzzle lowered. "You killed him. You shot him in the back."

"He was an outlaw. A killer," snarled Jim. "Come on."

Hoofs rattled on the ground. Phil looked up, saw Yule's five riders sweeping down the trail toward them. They were holding their fire.

Phil spoke slowly, tensely, trying desperately to keep the rage from choking his voice. "What you did, Jim, was the lowest thing a human could do. I wouldn't shoot my worst enemy in the back."

But Jim was wetting his lips and pointing to the riders.

There was a blur as Phil shot his fist. Jim grunted, flew back on his heels and lit in the dust. "You yellow coward." He turned to Madge. "Git behind me. I'll stand 'em off."

He could see the riders booming closer and closer. The man in the lead had a rifle to his shoulder. Phil's gun was ready. A voice shouted.

"Hold it, boys!"

Phil whirled. Big Mike Yule stood erect, clutching at a small pine tree by his side. His face was ashen. The back of his shirt was brownish. He bit his lips. The riders saw him. They came on, halted a few feet away.

With a moan, Jim got to his feet. His jaw went slack when he saw Yule. Yule only stared straight ahead. He had evidently come to, pulled himself erect by using the tree as a leverage. He was speaking again.

"Kid—" he looked at Phil—"take the gal home. Quick."

One thought was uppermost in Phil's mind. Get Madge to safety. They rode double on Phil's mount.

"What about Jim?" Phil looked at the groveling, whining whelp of a man he had worshiped.

"Noyes takes the trail over the lava flats into the badlands. My men will give him a start. It's up to him to outrun 'em. He's getting more of a chance than he gave my daughter—than he gave me."

Jim Noyes raced across the clearing, brought his horse out of the brush. For one fleeting second he looked squarely into Phil's eyes. Some of that old arrogance had returned to his features. He waved his hand, spurred toward the badlands.

Phil rode slowly down the trail, holding Madge in front of him. He looked back. Big Mike Yule was down. His riders gone.

"What will happen to Jim?" Madge's voice was calm, deliberate.

"Jim cut his own trail. He'll have to follow it. If he's lucky he'll win, if he's not—"

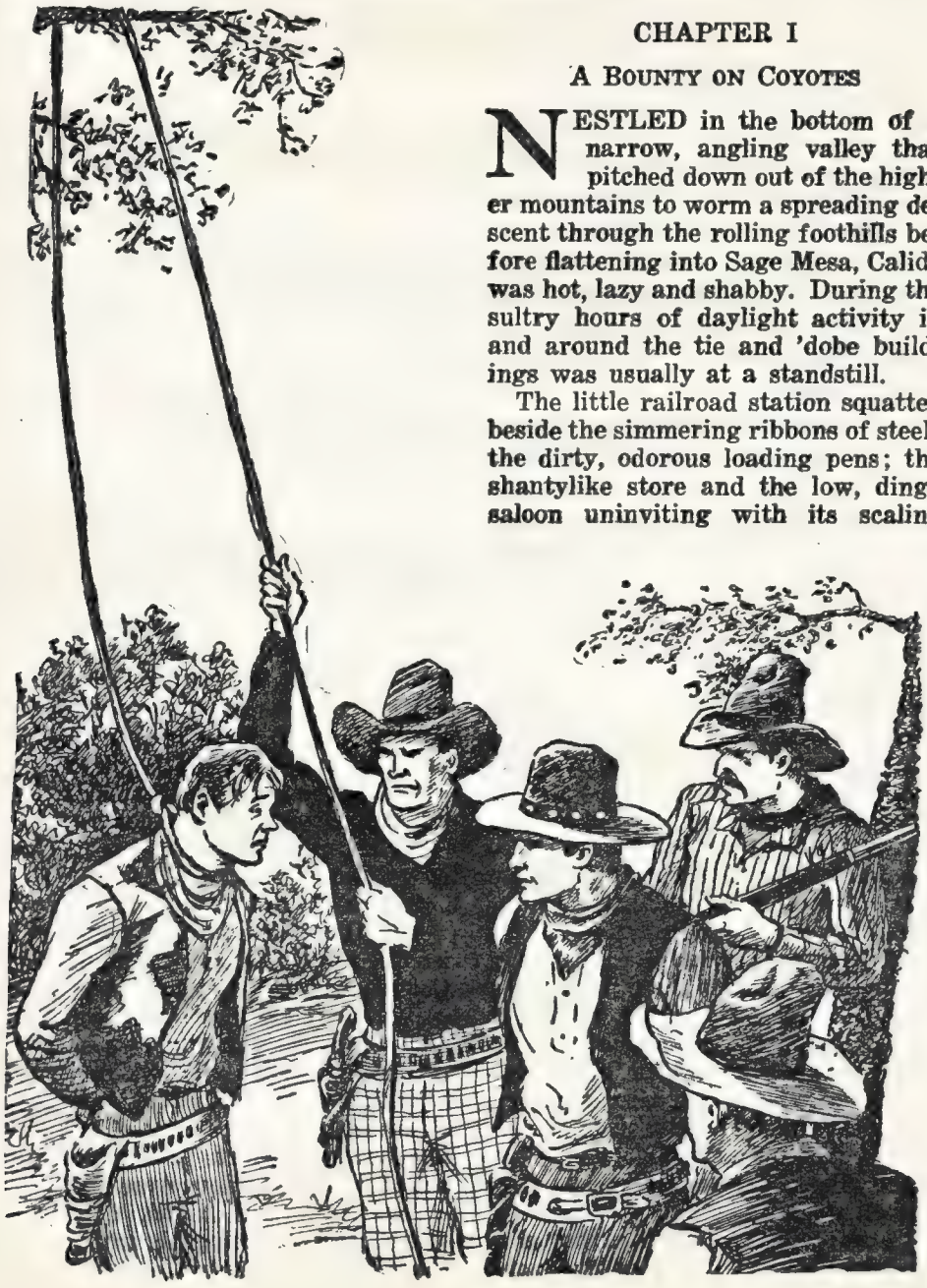
There was a rattle of gunfire from the other side of the hill. Phil knew it was Jim. The hero worship which had burned in Phil's breast all these years was dead. But there was a new light in his eye now.

"An outlaw with a code of honor. A hero with less manhood than a skunk. Life is sure funny."

Long-Rope Harvest

By Jack Drummond

A promise to a dying man put a curse on Boyd Coleman—a curse that could only be wiped out by hangman's hemp. But it wasn't in Coleman's code to betray a dead man's trust.



CHAPTER I

A Bounty on Coyotes

NESTLED in the bottom of a narrow, angling valley that pitched down out of the higher mountains to worm a spreading descent through the rolling foothills before flattening into Sage Mesa, Calido was hot, lazy and shabby. During the sultry hours of daylight activity in and around the tie and 'dobe buildings was usually at a standstill.

The little railroad station squatted beside the simmering ribbons of steel; the dirty, odorous loading pens; the shantylike store and the low, dingy saloon uninviting with its scaling

paint offered a lazy, indifferent welcome to Boyd Coleman. He reined his claybank horse into the short, main street and pulled the brim of his sweat-stained hat low against the slanted rays of the early morning sun.

At the sun-baked hitchrail in front of the saloon three cow-ponies stood patiently switching flies. Boyd raked them with a glance that passed quickly over the two Flying W horses to settle on a small, chunky roan marked with a Block L. The roan looked drawn and jaded. Sweat, dried and caked, ruffed the hair on his shoulders and flanks as he slouched on three legs, his head drooped low.

Boyd's serious features pulled into perplexed lines which straightened his lips and narrowed his gray eyes.

"Vance's roan," he muttered dubiously. "Wonder what he's doin' down here this early?"

He was still frowning in puzzled fashion when he pushed a gap in the swinging doors of the saloon and stepped inside where he paused momentarily. His eyes adjusted themselves to the poor light of the interior where the gloom was rank with the stench of cheap whisky and stale tobacco smoke.

As his vision cleared, objects in the small room took shape and he saw that except for the fat bartender who dozed in a tilted chair, that the place was void of human life.

The bartender squinted at him through half-opened eyes, recognized the intruder and dropped the front legs of his chair to the floor.

"Hello, Boyd." He shuffled up behind the bar, paused expectantly. "Ridin' early, ain't you?"

"Late," corrected Boyd. "Been in the saddle most of the night."

The bartender nodded his understanding. "Came up from the valley, I take it. This hole is hot enough, but the San Joaquin is just one jump short of hell this time of year. What you drinkin'?"

"I crave water, but even that ain't good in this town," drawled Boyd, and flashed a quick smile that broke into full being fast and disappeared in the same manner. He threw a quick glance around the room. "Vance around? I saw his horse out front."

The face of the bartender soured perceptibly. He jerked his head toward a closed door in the back of the room.

"He's settin' in a game in the back room with Pope Fanning and Chuck an' Eph Wallace."

Boyd scowled. "How long has he been here?"

"Blowed in about dark last night. Game got goin' right after that. Been a dozen different ones set in, but Pope an' Vance have rode her through without a break. Wish they'd knock off. The day man is down in bed sick an' I can't lock up the joint till they bust up that game."

"You can get ready to lock her up, Hi," said Boyd, his face grim. "I aim to bust up that game pronto." He jerked a crooked thumb toward the front door. "That roan been standing out there all this time?"

Hiram Gorman nodded. "I told Vance a couple times he oughta stable the critter. Would have done it myself, but yuh know how Vance is when he's drinkin'. He's plumb touchy an' when the cards go against him he's meaner'n hell. I did water the poor beast a couple times."

"Hell of a way to treat a horse," growled Boyd, his eyes flashing.

"Ain't only hosses he treats thataway," muttered Hi Gorman.

"What?" Boyd turned on him.

Hi shifted his gaze, took to polishing the top of the bar. He knew Boyd Coleman; knew that he would tolerate no harsh criticism of the youthful son of old Buck Landers whose vices ran to strong drink and gamb'ing. Still, it was time somebody took Boyd Coleman to task, convinced him that his stubborn efforts to make a man out of Vance Landers were futile.

"Speakin' as a friend, Boyd," he said slowly, choosing his words with care, "when you goin' to wake up? I

mean, when you goin' to quit lettin' Vance Landers make a damned fool outa you?"

Color tinged Boyd's face. His eyes took on an icy glint.

"Go on, Hi," he invited softly. "Spill what's on your mind."

The bartender had gone too far to turn back now so he plunged recklessly ahead.

"All right," he said, "I'll give it to you in a lump, Boyd. In the four months that old Buck Landers has been dead that danged whelp of his has drunk up an' gambled every cent the old man left. When the money was gone he started plastering Kern City with his IOU's. You put a stop to that because folks up in Kern City are your friends. But you couldn't stop Pope Fanning from takin' his paper.

"Before you got wise to it Pope had dang near five thousand dollars stacked up in Vance Landers' papers. To head Pope off from makin' a play for the Block L you gave Pope warning to lay off the kid. An' then you went down to Bakersfield to see Jim Rowland about gettin' an advance on your fall shippers so you could pick up them notes." He broke off, frowned at Boyd. "Did you get the money?"

Strangely enough there was no resentment in Boyd Coleman's face when he nodded.

"Rowland advanced me five thousand, even money."

HI GORMAN gave his shoulders a hopeless shrug. "Yuh see what I mean, Boyd? That five thousand will clean up them old notes, but it won't touch the new ones he's signed his name to since he blowed in here last night. You're buckin' a game yuh can't win at. Pope Fanning is my boss, but I don't favor some of his habits. Why don't you just bust Vance Landers' neck an' call it a day?"

"I'll bust a neck, but it won't be Landers'," asserted Boyd in a voice that had gone flat, deadly. "I warned Pope Fanning once!"

He moved back from the bar, took a hitch on his Levis and loosened the heavy .45 that sagged low on his right thigh. His eyes were troubled and a flush high up on his cheekbones gave evidence that his anger was flaring.

Voices raised in anger smote his ears as he reached the door leading into the card room. He paused a moment to listen, then suddenly leapt into action. His left hand found and turned the knob as his body crashed against the door and he went hurtling into the room.

All four card players were on their feet. Pope Fanning and Vance Landers were facing each other across the table. Fanning's right hand rested against his chest, the thumb hooked loosely in the V neck of his plaid vest. Landers' right hand hovered close to the black butt of a Colt that protruded from a tilted holster slung low on his right thigh. Chuck and Eph Wallace had kicked back their chairs and faded back out of the line of fire.

Boyd's crashing entrance startled all of them for the moment. But his sharp command and the threat of his drawn gun steadied them, held them there poised, waiting.

"Hold it!" Boyd barked and advanced slowly, his gun playing on them.

Vance Landers, who had been snarling across the table at Fanning, was the first to recover from his surprise. His flushed, dissipated face was a study in expressions. First surprise, then relief, and finally cunning. His greenish eyes took on a venomous glint. His loose lips curled back into a vicious snarl that bared his teeth.

Boyd sensed what was going on in his mind and spoke to head it off. "Ease off there, Vance," he cautioned harshly. "Maybe you better get out of here."

Vance Landers flushed a deeper hue and his hand, which had been stealthily inching toward his gun, paused and then dropped to his side. Pope Fanning, gambler and owner of the

saloon, nodded sagaciously, his sharp eyes on Landers.

"Trying for a sneak shot, were you?" His lips curled disdainfully. "It's lucky for you that Coleman horned in here. I'd have either made you eat crow or fill your hand!"

"I'll get you when the odds ain't three to one, you crooked-dealing tinhorn!" Vance threatened.

Pope Fanning's face streaked white. "One more yap out of you and I'll drop you where you stand, kid," he warned in a sultry voice.

"Take it easy, you two," ordered Boyd, and there was that about his voice that commanded attention. "I'm still holding the high hand in this deal." He flipped his gun to emphasize his words. "What's your grief with Fanning, Vance?"

"He just cold-decked me!"

"Why you—"

"Cut it, Fanning!" barked Boyd.

The gambler hesitated, then relaxed under the threat of Boyd's gun. He knew Boyd Coleman, knew that the man was not bluffing. If pushed he would shoot and it was a pretty well established fact that he shot straight when he did shoot.

Boyd shot a hard, scorching glance at Vance Landers and then gave his attention to Eph Wallace. Eph Wallace was an old man, grizzled and whiskered, and head of the Wallace clan that occupied the Wallace Basin lying east and north from Calido. To those in the basin his word was law. To those on the outside it was square, trustworthy. And so Boyd Coleman questioned him for details.

"Eph," he said, "you were sitting in the game. Was it straight?"

The grizzled old cowman nodded. "It's been on the level since me an' Chuck set in. Looked to me like Vance had got hisself outside of too much liquor. He was bettin' them plumb foolish."

"Yeah?" Vance whirled on the cattleman. "Just like I figured. I was hitched up in a brother-in-law game!"

Sparks shot from old Eph's eyes. He flashed them at Boyd. "Put up that gun, Coleman, and I'll do you a big favor by killing this rat here an' now!"

"There'll be no killing here, Eph," Boyd retorted. "I'll just balance this gun till Vance gets clear." He turned to Landers. "Better amble out to your horse, Vance. I'll be out directly."

VANCE LANDERS' eyes glinted their resentment. He didn't like having orders tossed at him. All eyes followed him as he went out through the opening. Boyd was on the verge of sheathing his gun when Vance, after taking only a step into the barroom, suddenly whirled, dragged his gun. He was framed in the doorway only a moment. His gun belched lead. Pope Fanning spun around in a half turn, groaned and sank to the floor. Both Wallaces cursed and started for their guns.

"Reach high!" bellowed Boyd.

Eph was seasoned and a good judge of men. He froze. Chuck, much younger and impulsive, had his gun half drawn before another sharp command from Boyd stayed his hand.

"Stop, you fool!" yelled Boyd. "Don't make me kill you!"

Chuck let his gun slide back into the holster. His eyes widened.

"Why, damn you!" he exclaimed. "I believe you would cut me down!"

"Just like a stalk of wheat!" Boyd declared bluntly. "One killing is enough."

A commotion out front came to their ears. They heard the pounding hoofbeats as a bolting horse got under way. A moment later the thundering roar of Hi Gorman's shotgun jarred the building. It was followed by angry curses and a second later the bartender stalked into the back room, his sawed-off shotgun tucked into the crook of his arm.

"Who's hurt?" he queried, throwing a glance around.

"Did yuh get Landers?" Chuck Wallace questioned him anxiously.

Hi Gorman swore. "Hell, no. He was out of range. Where's—"

Then his eyes fell on Pope Fanning who was raising himself to a sitting posture. Gorman bounded across the room and dropped down beside the wounded man.

"Yuh bad hurt, Pope?" he questioned, his face anxious.

Fanning peered at him groggily and shook his head. "I—don't know. Just winged, I guess. The jolt must have put me out for a minute. Help me into a chair, Hi."

Gorman lifted him into a chair and examined his wound. When he had gone in search of arnica and something for bandage, Fanning lifted his gaze to Boyd who was still standing with drawn gun, watching proceedings calmly.

"Coleman," hissed the gambler through clenched teeth, "if I wasn't winged so I can't use a gun I'd kill you! You're the cause of me being shot!"

"Am I?" Boyd's brows puckered quizzically.

"I'm telling you," snapped Fanning. "If you hadn't barged in here that yellow coyote couldn't have got away with a lousy, rotten trick like that."

"You named it, Pope," spoke up Chuck Wallace. "While Coleman holds a gun on us, the kid he's dry-nursin' pours lead into you. That's one for you to remember, Pope." His eyes shifted to Boyd. "I'm advisin' you to ride low in the saddle after this, Coleman, an' yuh better range plenty wide of Wallace Basin. We got a bounty on coyotes an' skunks in there."

"Thanks," grunted Boyd with no change of expression. "I'll remember that."

"That gun growed to your hand?" sneered Chuck in a voice that was challenging.

Boyd eyed him a long moment. Then, with one deft movement, he sheathed his gun.

"We start even, C h u c k," he drawled, "whenever you feel lucky."

Chuck Wallace stared at him, licked lips that had suddenly gone dry. He forced a grin that was meant to be scornful and shook his head.

"I ain't that easy, Coleman. I was some rattled a minute ago, but I'm thinkin' straight now. Too straight to try to match your draw."

"Maybe you do better with a rifle," hinted Boyd, his eyes showing his contempt.

"Try ridin' up through the basin an' find out," invited Chuck.

Eph glowered at him. "Shut your mouth, kid. You talk too much."

Eph Wallace was a man of few words, but when he did speak those in Wallace Basin heeded. Chuck grumbled under his breath and subsided into a sulky silence.

Boyd favored Pope Fanning with his attention and found that the gambler's angry glare was transformed into a gloating sneer. Boyd moved toward him, stared hard into his face.

"Fanning," he said, "how much did Vance lose this time?"

A grin crossed Fanning's lips. "Plenty," he gloated.

"How much?" demanded Boyd.

"A little over three thousand and I've got his IOU's to cover it," jeered Fanning. "I'll have the Block L in spite of hell and high water and you, too, Coleman!"

Boyd shook a stubborn head. "No, you won't, Fanning. I warned you about taking any more of the kid's paper and I meant it. What you got from him today don't stick!"

"They'll stick all right," contradicted Fanning.

Suddenly his eyes widened and he lunged from his chair and dived toward the table. But Boyd Coleman was there ahead of him and, as Fanning came up, Boyd's fist shot straight out like a driving piston and connected flush with the gambler's jaw. The blow staggered Fanning, buckled his knees and pitched him to the floor where he lay still.

With Fanning out of the way Boyd reached for the sheaf of bills that

were stuffed under the chip rack. Thumbing through them, he came upon five of Vance Landers' IOU's which totaled better than three thousand dollars. While the two Wallaces watched, he dropped the paper money to the table and tore the IOU's into tiny bits which he scattered on the floor.

"That won't do you any good," growled Chuck Wallace. "I'm a witness that Landers signed them papers."

"Witness and be damned," snapped Boyd. "Fanning will never collect on those IOU's."

He backed to the door and passed through the opening into the barroom where Hi Gorman stood waiting.

"Get goin'!" Gorman hissed in his ear. "I'll probably lose my job for not stoppin' you, but I stick by my friends, Boyd."

"Thanks, Hi," breathed Boyd, and faded out of the saloon to his horse.

A second later he was racing out of town headed north along the Kern City road and Vance Landers' Block L ranch.

CHAPTER II

Hell-Bent for Trouble

ONCE clear of the town he checked the pace of his horse to a jog which two hours later brought him up to the Block L buildings. Vance Landers was not there. Apparently he had continued on to Kern City after leaving Calido. Boyd kindled a fire in the kitchen stove, cooked a delayed breakfast, cleaned up his dishes and went down to the corral where he screwed his saddle on a fresh horse.

He put in the remainder of the day riding the Block L range. It was dusk when he returned to the ranch. As he unsaddled and turned his horse loose to roll he noted that Vance's roan was in the corral. Though dark was fast gathering, there was no light in the ranch house.

Boyd entered through the kitchen where he paused to fire the wick of a bracket lamp. As the glow fell over the room he saw that the stove was cold, but dirty dishes and scraps of food on the table gave testimony that Vance had partaken of food sometime during the day.

"That you, Coleman?" Vance's voice came to him from the living room.

Boyd took down the lamp and went into the other room. Vance Landers sat up from his reclining position on the couch. His hair was tousled and uncombed, his eyes were puffed and bloodshot and his breath reeked with the fumes of sour whisky. He squinted up at Boyd and attempted a grin that was little better than a sneer.

"Well, I see you're still among the living."

Boyd set the lamp on the table, dropped into a rocking chair and rolled a cigarette. He said nothing. Vance swung his feet to the floor, put his hands to the sides of his head and pulled a wry face.

"Well," he grumbled, "how'd you come out?"

Boyd frowned across at him. "With a whole skin. I got them quieted down without spilling any more lead."

"How bad did I drill that slick-fingered gambler?"

"Through the shoulder." Boyd favored him with the full force of his smoldering eyes. "That was a rotten trick you pulled, Vance. Lookin' at it from any angle, it was dirty."

Vance's lips curled. "Preachin' again, are yuh? Suppose it was all right when they had me with the odds three to one?"

"I kinda figure you made them odds yourself. Anyway, I had them all covered when you snaked your gun an' drilled Fanning. That's dang near as rotten as unlimbering on an unarmed man. It put me in a tight."

"Well, nobody asked you to horn in," snapped Vance.

"That's true enough," Boyd admitted. "No use cryin' about it now. Just the same, don't get yourself tangled

up in any more shootin' scrapes. It might not be healthy."

Resentment flared in Vance. "You tellin' me what to do!" he challenged.

Boyd emitted a dry, bitter laugh. "I don't have much luck tellin' you anything, kid. I'm tryin' to give you some advice that might come in handy sometime. While I'm passin' it out, I might add that you better give Pope Fanning an' the town of Calido a wide berth hereafter."

"Yeah? Well, Calido ain't nothin' but a sheepherder town anyhow. And Pope Fanning is a yellow, slick-fingered crook."

Boyd shrugged. "Wallace Basin is another place you better bend wide of."

"I ain't lost nothin' down in Wallace Basin," grunted Vance.

"Lost somethin' in Calido, didn't you?"

Vance soured. "What of it?"

"Nothin' except you seem hell-bent on gambling this ranch out from under yourself. I've done my best to head you off, but I've gone my limit. You've got to start pullin' with me, kid, if you want to save this spread."

"Save it so you can come in for a half-interest in it in a couple years?" snapped Vance. "I ain't that crazy, Coleman. I aim to sell this outfit if I can find a buyer."

Boyd gave a start. "You're crazy!" he ejaculated.

"Yeah, like a fox," sneered Vance. "I'm takin' what I can get outa this place an' slopin'. All my life I been held down. While the old man was livin' I had to knuckle down to him, but now that he's gone I'm cuttin' loose. I aim to see some country an' live like I want to live. I'm fed up with bein' tied to this one-horse spread."

Boyd's face was serious. He bent toward the younger man earnestly.

"You can't be all bad, Vance. There must be some good in you somewhere. Ain't you had enough fling to satisfy you? Why, hell, kid, you've waded through better than twelve thousand dollars since your dad died. Don't you think it's about time to get off the booze an' gamblin' an' knuckle down to things here at the ranch? The place is goin' to hell. No hands left an' there's more work here than I can handle. I'd sure appreciate a little help."

"If yuh don't like the set-up here, why don't you blow?" grated Vance.

"Reckon you know why," said Boyd softly.

"Yuh bet I do," snapped Vance. "You figure to stick it out an' come in for your cut on the ranch. The old man's will says that if you stick here till I'm twenty-one you'll get half of the spread. You was maybe the old man's foreman an' his friend, but you're nothing but a pain in the neck to me. It's two years before I'm twenty-one. I'll unload this spread a long time before that."

"You've practically got it unloaded to Pope Fanning right now," said Boyd gruffly, his eyes smoldering with an anger he could hardly contain. "Fanning will demand payment on those IOU's one of these days and if you haven't got the money to pay off he'll sell you out."

"Thought you went to Bakersfield to raise the money to pay off?" snapped Vance.

"I did—" Boyd's laugh was bitter —"an' to make things easier for me you got tangled up in another game with Fanning and dropped another three thousand."

VANCE gave his shoulders an impatient shrug. "What's the odds? I can unload this place for enough to pay off Fanning an' have money left over. Did yuh raise any money in Bakersfield?"

Boyd nodded. "I got Jim Rowland to advance me five thousand on two hundred and fifty head of shippers to be delivered this fall."

"Jim Rowland!" exploded Vance. "I'll never sell a head of my beef to that dirty sidewinder!"

"Why not?" challenged Boyd.

"Your dad always sold to Rowland."

"Yeah an' took Rowland's figure just because they was friends. Me, I'll sell to the highest bidder an' Rowland won't be it. He's skinned this outfit for the last time."

"You're m i s t a k e n there," said Boyd, an edge to his voice. "They don't come any squarer than Jim Rowland. Anyway, we're tied up with him now and we'll have to deliver the beef and take market price this fall."

"I sell no beef to Rowland," stated Vance flatly.

Temper flared in Boyd's cheeks. "Don't talk like a fool," he growled angrily. "He's got me tied up solid."

"He ain't got my signature on anything."

"No, but he will have. I've got the agreement here with me. When you sign it, I'll take it down to him."

Vance's jaw clamped shut. He shook his head stubbornly. "I'm not signing anything, Coleman."

"Oh, yes, you are," contradicted Boyd.

"Guess again, smart feller," grated Vance. "You've been tryin' to run me an' this ranch long enough. I'm gettin' damned sick of it. What the old man ever seen in you I don't know. But I ain't never liked you and I never will."

"That's your privilege an' makes no difference one way or the other far as keepin' this outfit together goes. Far as me wanting any part of this spread —I don't. Nobody will be more tickled than me the day you turn twenty-one and I'm cut loose from a bargain that was forced on me. But, until that time, I'm stickin' providin' I can keep from killing you that long. You're no good, Vance, an' the trail you are following can lead to only one end."

"Aw, shut up!" snarled Vance and leapt to his feet. "You're always preachin'. The old man was always preachin', too, so I reckon he put you up to it. But now that he's gone you better forget it. I don't like your brand of religion an' I aim to live my life any damn way I please."

He whirled around and stalked out the door. Boyd watched him go, grinned sardonically, and got up to go into the kitchen where he cooked his supper and later cleaned up his and Vance's dirty dishes. This job finished, he repaired to the living room where he filled his pipe and sat there in the pale glow of the oil lamp brooding.

PRESENTLY he heard a rig drive up and a man hailed the house. He went to the door and peered out. He saw a light buggy drawn by one horse pulled up close to the porch and recognized it as belonging to Doctor Harmon from Kern City.

"Hello, Boyd," the doctor called a greeting, making no move to get out of the buggy.

"Howdy, Doc," returned Boyd. "Tie up an' come in a spell."

"Haven't time," refused the doctor. "Late now in getting home. Was down to Calido to look at Pope Fanning's shoulder."

"How is it?" inquired Boyd, crossing the porch and pausing beside the rig.

"Shoulder is getting along fine, but his temper is vile. Bad business, that shooting. It doesn't take many to make a man mighty unpopular in a country. Fanning blames you."

"He would," grunted Boyd indifferently.

"Fanning is yelling about the way you tore up those IOU's. He says he's going to demand immediate payment on the others he holds."

Boyd shrugged carelessly. "Let him demand. It takes time and the law to close out a ranch."

"Haven't you got the money to pay him off?" questioned Harmon with surprise.

"Sure."

"Then why not pay him and get him off your neck?"

"Can't. I've got the money, but it ain't ours yet. Won't be until Vance signs an agreement with Jim Rowland."

"Have you asked him to sign?"

"Yes."

"And he won't?"

"No. He'll come around to it in a few days, I reckon."

Doc Harmon shook a troubled head. "You've got a lot of patience and blind faith, Boyd."

"I've got neither," denied Boyd. "I know what I'm up against here."

"I wonder if you do?" mused Harmon. "Dying people should never exact promises from their friends. It's like putting a curse on them. Old Buck Landers couldn't have known how tough he was making it for you."

"Buck meant all right," defended Boyd. "He knew that Vance needed somebody to ride herd on him an' Buck had faith enough in me to trust me with the job."

"Yes, he gave you a job and then forgot to give you any tools to work with," complained Harmon. "You haven't got any hold over Vance or this ranch either. You won't have until Vance is twenty-one and by that time it will be too late. What I can't understand is why Buck didn't will you half of the ranch now instead of letting it ride until Vance becomes of age."

"Maybe he wanted to be sure I'd hold to my promise and look out for the kid until he is twenty-one."

"Then he should have appointed you guardian and willed you a share of the ranch. He should have given you something to work with, Boyd. The way it is you haven't got a chance. Vance owns the ranch, handles the money and affairs. Hell, he even pays your wages—or at least he is supposed to. I doubt very much whether you have drawn a nickel in wages since Buck died. Promises to the dying are unreasonable and annoying at times. Nobody would blame you if you broke yours."

"I won't break it, Doc."

"That's the sad part of it," grumbled the doctor. "You'll stick. You'll keep on taking Vance's insults and curses. You'll keep on pulling him out of scrapes at the risk of your own neck and the good of your name. In short, you'll continue to be a fool because Buck Landers was your friend and you gave him your word that you would dry-nurse his kid. Well, you're lucky, Boyd. It can't last much longer under the pace Vance is traveling. He'll end up on the end of a rope and Pope Fanning will have the Block L."

"Then maybe I'll catch on with Chet an' Russ Kenrick," shrugged Boyd. "They've both given me the offer."

"They're good boys to tie to," Harmon approved. "They've been with you all the way."

"Them and you, Doc."

"I've done nothing but try to make you break your word," growled Harmon. "That you haven't proves you are more of a man than I am." He gathered up his lines. "Well, I've got to be knocking along. Late now. Just thought I'd drop by and tell you what to expect from Pope Fanning."

"Thanks, Doc. I'll keep my eye on him."

When Harmon had gone Boyd went back into the house, smoked out his pipe and went to bed.

CHAPTER III

Long-Rope Lobo

VANCE had not returned to the ranch the next morning when Boyd got up. Evidently he had ridden to Kern City and spent the night there. Boyd lingered over his breakfast undecided what to do. He thought of riding into Kern City and forcing an issue with Vance about Rowland's agreement. But he soon vetoed this, knowing that he would get nowhere with Vance by going at him in that manner.

He next thought of washing his hands of the whole matter and riding down to Bakersfield to return the money to Rowland. This notion was also soon banished, for among

other things Boyd Coleman was no quitter. He had plenty of time to work out a solution, he told himself. There was no rush about getting that agreement signed and back into Jim Rowland's hands. Also, it would take Fanning some time to get action on the IOU'S he held.

There was no safe at the ranch and no place to leave the money where he felt it would be secure so Boyd left it on his person, stuck away in his money belt. Far safer there, he judged, than stuck away in the ranch house somewhere.

It was late afternoon when Russ Kenrick rode up to the Block L. Russ was the younger son of Jim Kenrick, a crippled oldster who owned the J K Connected outfit lying southeast of Kern City, toward the northern reaches of the Piute Mountains.

Both Russ and his brother Chet had proved themselves staunch friends to Boyd and seldom failed to jog off the main road and drop in at the Block L when on their way in or out of Kern City.

"How are yuh, old son?" Russ greeted jovially as Boyd came out of the machine shed to greet him.

Boyd matched his grin. "Goin' some place or just poundin' leather?"

Russ stepped down to the ground, squatted on his heels and got out tobacco sack and papers.

"Amblin' home from town," he explained. "Knowed you was here alone. Seen Vance in town. He looked an' acted like he'd gathered hisself around an assortment of drinks."

Boyd's grin tightened. "I'll be surprised if anybody ever tells me they seen him sober."

Russ turned serious. "When you goin' to break away from that double-jointed shote, Boyd?"

Boyd's features took on grave lines. "That's something nobody knows."

"Meanin' which?"

"Nothin'."

"You're a fool for punishment," groaned Russ, shaking his head. "If you're stickin' because you got fool notions that you can straighten him up, you're workin' on a lost cause, amigo. He's plumb no-good. If he was a friend to you it would be different —but hell, he's plumb raw with yuh. It ain't your style to eat anybody's dirt, but you shore swallow everything he pushes your way."

Boyd offered him a tight grin. "Reckon you've said enough, Russ. Vance ain't bad. He's just wild."

"You don't believe that any more than I do," scoffed Russ, disregarding the warning glint in Boyd's eyes. "If it was me, I'd peel the hide off him with a blacksnake an' then stake him out in an ant hill."

Boyd's eyes narrowed, but he said nothing. Russ Kenrick was his friend so he could get away with this kind of talk.

"Heard that Pope Fanning took him for another three thousand," continued Russ. "That run-in you an' him had with Fanning didn't spoil Vance's appetite for poker. He was all tied up in a game with Cass and Jess Boone and a couple tinhorns when I left Kern City."

Boyd's interest quickened. "What was he usin' for money?"

"Paper, as near as I could figure out. Yuh know, playin' poker with Vance is just like stickin' your hand in his pocket an' takin' his money. What good luck he might have ain't got a chance against his temper an' fool playin'."

Boyd scarcely heard him. His face was puckered into a thoughtful frown. "These Boones," he said. "Hard outfit, ain't they?"

"Not hard. Just no-good. They was nesters that squatted down in the hills close to our outfit. We figured they was eatin' too much of our beef so we run 'em out. Hear they're holed up somewhere down in the lower Piutes now. What they do for a livin' nobody seems to know, but we've taken to watching our beef pretty close."

"Think they're swingin' a wide loop?"

Russ shrugged. "Dunno. We don't cotton much to rustlers in this country. It ain't been really rustled for years. I was just a kid when my dad helped string up the last bunch that found this range a tough one to drag a long rope on."

"Who was takin' Vance's paper?" questioned Boyd.

"The Boones. And I'm thinkin' that's a poor place for it to be."

Boyd was silent for a time. Then he said abruptly, "Guess I'll drift into town for the evening."

Russ shot him a quick glance, then grinned. "Got any objections to havin' company?"

"Thought you just came from there?"

"Ain't no signs posted tellin' me I can't come back," Russ chuckled.

"In that case we'll be ridin'," said Boyd and legged it down to the corral after his horse.

IN Kern City the poker game had broken up when Cass and Jess Boone refused to accept any more of Vance's IOU'S. The three of them were standing at the bar drinking when Boyd and Russ walked into the saloon.

Vance shot them a startled, questioning glance. Boyd nodded and spoke. He raked both Boones with a hard, biting glance and stepped up to the bar leaving a distance of ten or twelve feet between himself and Cass Boone. Vance eyed Boyd dubiously while he drank with Russ Kenrick. Finally he pulled away from the Boones and edged along the bar. Boyd turned at his approach and their eyes clashed.

"What you doin' in town?" demanded Vance. "Doggin' my tracks again?"

For answer Boyd nodded his head toward Cass and Jess Boone. "Why don't you invite your friends over for a drink? I'm buyin'."

Vance's lip curled. "Maybe they're particular who they drink with." His eyes shifted to Russ Kenrick's face.

Russ chose to laugh off the thrust. "They've got reason to be skittish. They've met up with me before, Vance."

"Yeah, an' they'll probably meet up with you again." There was a veiled threat in Vance's words.

"You're drunk, kid," Boyd cut in. "But that don't give you a license to let your tongue wag free and easy. You better drag it for the ranch an' sleep it off."

"Aw, go to hell," snapped Vance, and turned to retrace his steps to his two companions.

"That maverick's gonna bite hisself an' die one of these days," mused Russ. "His disposition is plumb poisonous."

"Liquor talkin'," defended Boyd. "The kid has his good points."

"He keeps them damn well hidden," retorted Russ. "Looks like the game is busted up."

Boyd nodded. "We'll go catch us something to eat an' then I'll round up Vance an' head him home. I'll break him of putting out IOU'S or break his neck."

"I might do that for you one of these days," drawled Russ.

Boyd's quick glance was questioning. "What do you mean by that?"

"He's gettin' into dang poor company and a rope has no conscience."

Boyd scowled and turned toward the door. It was an hour later when he and Russ Kenrick returned to the saloon. The place was filling up fast, but Vance Landers and his two companions were nowhere to be seen. A round of the other places in town made their search unsuccessful.

"Well?" queried Russ.

"Might as well drift," said Boyd. "Looks like Vance took my advice for once an' went home."

Russ nodded agreement. They went out to their horses, swung aboard and rode out of town. They rode in silence for the most part, slouched deep in their saddles, letting their horses set

their own pace through the black night. Both pulled rein when they came to the road that angled off the main highway toward the Block L.

"Here's where we split," said Russ lazily.

Boyd g r u n t e d an affirmative. "Thanks for goin' along in with me, Russ. Tell Chet an' the rest of your family, hello."

"Sure," called Russ who was already starting on down the road again. *"Adios."*

"So long," called Boyd and turned his horse into the Block L road.

HE slouched again in the saddle for the three-mile ride to the Block L buildings and lost himself in his thoughts. He had gone a mile when he suddenly stiffened in the saddle and pulled his horse to an unceremonious halt. He thought he had heard the sound of a muffled hoofbeat approaching from behind. But, as he listened and no other sound rose above the usual night noises, he judged that his ears were playing him tricks and rode on again.

A moment later his horse snorted and jumped. A rope hissed through the air, settled over Boyd's shoulders and fouled his arms tight to his sides. The plunge of his horse jerked him clear of the saddle. He struck the ground on his neck and shoulders with a jolt that dazed him. Before he could recover himself a shadowy shape leapt upon him. Some hard object crashed against his head showering his eyes with sparks and then darkness.

He awoke groggy and with a head that felt as if someone was driving spikes through it. How long he had lain there he had no idea. He sat there for some minutes peering around in the dark trying to get command of his hazy thoughts.

He got to his feet finally and looked for his horse. Apparently the animal had bolted for the ranch, for he was nowhere around. The activity cleared his head. His thoughts started making sense. Suddenly his hand flashed to his waist. His jaw sagged open and he clawed wildly.

"Gone!" he muttered aloud and the knowledge of it dazed him.

But there was no mistake about it. His shirt was torn open and his money belt was gone. The answer plain. Only one person knew that he carried a money belt. Only one person on this range had seen that money belt, and that person was Vance Landers! Landers hadn't actually seen that five thousand dollars that he had gotten from Jim Rowland, but he knew that he had it. He also knew about the money belt and knew that the five thousand dollars would be in that belt.

With his head paining and anger seething inside of him, Boyd struck off down the road toward the Block L. The house was dark when he came in sight of it. Before entering he went down to the corral where he found his horse standing beside the pole gate. He led the horse inside the enclosure and stripped off his gear. With the use of matches he located Vance's roan feeding at the rack.

He got a short catch rope, dabbed the loop over the roan's head and ran exploring hands over his body. The roan had cooled considerably, but the sweat that Vance never failed to raise on him still dampened his neck and flanks. Boyd got out his watch, struck a match and stared at the face of it. The hands pointed to a half hour before midnight.

It had been shortly after nine o'clock when he and Russ Kenrick had left town. Figuring an hour for their slow ride to the junction where the Block L road joined the main highway, and another hour for his walk to the ranch, he had been unconscious about a half hour from the blow he had received on the head. If Vance had ridden straight to the ranch after the attack, he had reached there in plenty of time for his horse to cool off as much as he had.

Convinced that he was on the right

trail, Boyd made his way to the house. He found a lamp in the living room, stuck a match to the wick and looked around. The room was empty. Apparently Vance had gone upstairs to his room and to bed.

Boyd climbed the stairs, paused in front of Vance's closed door a second, then turned the knob and strode inside. Vance sat bolt upright in bed at his entrance. He looked startled like a man who has been surprised from a sound sleep. He blinked as the light struck his eyes, passed a hand across them to shut out the glare of the lamp.

"What's the matter?" he grumbled irritably.

"Nothing," muttered Boyd, his eyes alert to every action and detail. "Just wondered if you were home."

"That's a hell of a thing to wake a man up for," growled Vance and scowled at him. "What time is it anyway?"

"About midnight."

Vance showed surprise. "Gettin' to be a regular old heller, ain't you?"

"How long you been home?" Boyd questioned casually.

"Quite a spell. I left town right after I seen you."

"Kinda unusual for you, ain't it?" said Boyd, and turned to set the lamp down on the old marble top commode.

IT was then that Vance saw the caked blood on the right side of his face. He stared, voiced an exclamation. "What the hell happened to you? Where'd you get that blood on your face?"

Boyd turned on him, stared into his face until he shifted his gaze.

"It's no use stalling, kid," he said. "You've put on a pretty good act, but figures don't lie." His voice hardened. "Where's that money belt?" he demanded bluntly.

Vance gave a start, brought his eyes back to his face. "What you talking about?" he muttered.

"Kid," said Boyd, "I've taken enough off you to bog down an ordinary man, but you pulled one too many raw ones tonight when you laid your gun barrel over my head and robbed me!"

"Robbed you!" exploded Vance, but his eyes betrayed his guilt.

"You heard me," grated Boyd. "You ain't fool enough to bring that money belt here with you, so I'm giving you five minutes to start talkin'."

"You're crazy," snorted Vance.

"I'll grant you that, but even a crazy man resents having five thousand bucks lifted off him. Listen, kid—" And he told Vance the details of what had happened. "You're the only man who knows I was packin' that money on me," he finished.

Vance's eyes were crafty as he shifted them from Boyd's face and growled: "Don't try passin' your sleepers into me, Coleman. You probably went south with that money and then butted your head against a rock to make it look like somebody had gun-whipped you."

Boyd nodded slowly, his anger mounting. "Takin' that way out of it, are yuh? Don't forget about that five thousand representing part payment on two hundred and fifty head of your steers. You're stuck for it."

"Looks to me like Jim Rowland is stuck," sneered Vance.

He swung his feet to the floor and pawed through his clothes for tobacco and papers and matches.

"How do yuh figure?" demanded Boyd.

"Simple," grinned Vance, a new confidence taking hold of him. "I ain't signing over any of my beef to Rowland and that five thousand he gave you is gone. Figure it out yourself."

"He'll get that money back or else the beef!" asserted Boyd, his jaw setting grimly.

"Not my beef," denied Vance. "If you think I'm goin' to hand over two hundred an' fifty head of steers an' get nothin' for them you're crazy."

"They've been paid for."

"To you, not me," pointed out Vance. "Listen, Coleman. It's nothin' to me if you jigger Rowland out of that money, but don't go tryin' to load the deadwood on me. I didn't take that money off you an' Rowland won't take any steers off this ranch!"

A wave of helplessness surged through Boyd as he stared into Vance Landers' sulky, dissipated face. It was true that he couldn't force Vance into selling his steers to Rowland. The agreement he had with Rowland was no good without Vance's signature and, from all indications, he would never get that signature. Under the conditions, he alone was responsible for the five thousand dollars that Rowland had advanced him.

Jim Rowland would naturally hold him accountable for that, and now the money was gone. In his own mind he was convinced that Vance had taken it, but getting it back was another question. Obviously Vance had hidden the money belt somewhere away from the ranch. Getting the information out of him was something that Boyd suddenly had little hope of accomplishing.

He could threaten Vance, might even give him the beating that he deserved, but the kid was stubborn. Information couldn't be knocked out of him easily, especially information about the whereabouts of that much money. His hands itched to get at Vance's throat, to choke the truth out of him, but he thought of old Buck Landers and his promise to him.

Silently cursing his helplessness, he stared into Vance's gloating face and warned: "If you're smart, you get that money belt back here to me in the morning, kid. You'll never get away with the steal. I'm warning you."

Before the gloating sneer on Vance's face could make him lose control of himself, he spun on his heel and stalked out of the room.

CHAPTER IV

For the Buzzards

BOYD COLEMAN didn't close his eyes the rest of the night. He sat quietly in his dark room waiting for sound of Vance leaving the house. He knew now that his one chance for getting back that money lay in following every move that Vance might make. But Vance didn't stir from his room until late the next morning. Later, when he left the ranch, Boyd was not far behind him.

Whether or not Vance knew that he was being followed, Boyd couldn't tell, but Vance made no stops on his way into Kern City. The next two days were nightmares for Boyd. He dogged Vance's tracks like a shadow waiting for the move that would show him the whereabouts of the money. None came. Vance knew by this time what Boyd's game was and he made no moves other than his customary ones of eating, sleeping and drinking.

Boyd also ate and drank, but sleep he denied himself lest Vance sneak away from him during the night. Finally, on the evening of the second day he knew he was whipped. He couldn't hold to the pace much longer. Vance, aware of the game he was playing, could wear him down, would wear him down.

His eyes were bloodshot, his thoughts murderous when he finally approached Vance for a final showdown.

"All right, kid," he said. "You've been calling me every turn of the cards. You've maybe got me beat in sight, but I've got the right hole card. I'm goin' back to the ranch and I'm goin' to stay there and come hell or high water them steers are goin' to be shipped to Jim Rowland. I'll back that up with a gun if necessary, so remember that an' do a little thinkin' on it."

"You denying me my own ranch?" challenged Vance.

"Not a bit of it. But from now on I'm running that ranch and them steers go where I say they go!"

That he meant exactly what he said, Vance Landers didn't have a doubt. He knew Boyd Coleman well enough for that and it gave him food for thought. He was still pondering it when Boyd crawled his horse and rode out of town.

For three days Boyd stuck close to the ranch and in all that time he saw nothing of Vance Landers. Apparently Vance had decided to take up quarters in Kern City for a while. On the afternoon of the third day Russ Kenrick stopped by to see Boyd.

"Saw Vance in town," he said after they had talked of other things for a time. "He and Cass and Jess Boone had their heads pretty close together at a table in the back end of the saloon. Struck me they was cookin' up something."

The words made Boyd thoughtful. "Thanks, Russ," he muttered after a time. "I had a hunch something was brewing. Reckon I'll take to doin' my ridin' at night an' my sleepin' in the daytime. Ain't likely Vance will try to pull a steal in daylight."

Russ scowled in puzzled fashion. "What in hell you talkin' about?"

"The Block L herd," explained Boyd. "I've got a hunch that Vance is going to try to rustle it."

"Rustle it!" exclaimed Russ. "How can a man rustle his own herd? Why *would* a man rustle his own herd?"

Boyd explained. He told Russ about being robbed of the money and his clashes with Vance.

"He's just ornery enough to rustle them shippers to keep Rowland from getting them," he said. "If he does that I sure am stuck."

"Then yuh better be blamed sure he don't," said Russ. "But you can't watch that herd alone. I'll come over an' help you an' fetch a couple of the boys with me."

Boyd shook his head. "Thanks, Russ. I can't do that. It's all right for me to watch that herd, but you'd be on the wrong side of the fence if you came over here to help me. Yuh see, them steers are legally Vance Landers'. There's no law against a man moving his own steers anywhere he wants to. There's likewise no law against him selling them to anybody he wants to.

"It wouldn't be rustling if he takes a notion to make off with them critters, and I ain't got any legal right to stop him. But I have got a moral right and I aim to back it up. With you it's different. It would look like hell if you were caught trying to stop a man from moving his own cows."

Russ nodded glumly. "Reckon you're right, Boyd. I can't come bustin' over here on Block L range. Just the same I aim to keep my eyes open and if you need a lift don't forget to yell."

WHEN Russ had gone, Boyd ate an early supper. He screwed a saddle on a fresh horse and rode south across Block L range to the rolling country where the beef herd was fattening on the grass of the higher draws.

It was dark when he reached them. He found the first bunch bedded down in a sheltered draw back from one of the three water tanks that caught the run-off from piped springs. Without disturbing them he rode on, circling toward the east fence for here trouble would strike if it came at all.

He passed the second of the three tanks and continued on east. It was a half hour later when he came to the fence, striking it at a point not far from where the south fence joined it to make the corner. It was somewhere close in this vicinity that he judged a break in the fence would be made.

He rode for a distance along the fence, found it intact and dropped away from it to the mouth of a low swale. Dismounting he dropped to the ground to await developments, if

any. Time dragged. He wanted to smoke, but decided against it.

An hour slipped by, another. The inactivity palled on him and finally he mounted his horse and pointed him back toward the herd, intending to circle it if for no other reason than to be moving. Probably down here on a fool's errand he told himself as he rode. He had nothing more concrete than a hunch that Vance Landers intended to rustle the herd. And even if those were Landers' intentions, there was nothing to tell him that Landers would attempt the steal tonight or tomorrow night, or a night even a week from now. There was plenty of time. It was a full month before shipping time.

Thoughts of riding night herd for maybe a week or two weeks pulled a groan from him which was suddenly stifled, as his ears picked up the unmistakable noise of a herd being disturbed. In a moment he heard voices and an odd thrill shot through him. His hunch had been right. Somebody was stirring the herd to their feet.

Coleman reined his horse toward the commotion and as he came up to the first stragglers he pulled a halt, raised his voice and called a warning.

"It's no go, Vance! This herd stays put!"

He waited for an answer. None came. Angered, he yelled again.

"You heard me!" he said. "You better get this straight, kid. This herd stays here. I aim to see that it stays if I have to do it with bullets!"

Vance Landers spoke then. His voice came from off to Boyd's right.

"If you know what's healthy for you, Coleman, you'll get the hell out of here. I told you Jim Rowland would never get these cows and I meant it."

"Don't try to move these critters, kid," warned Boyd. "I mean business."

"So do I," Vance fired back at him. "Don't forget that these are my critters and I can do what I damn please with them. If you get in my way I'll blast you out of it, Coleman, and the law will stand by me."

"Then come around after them in daylight," barked Boyd.

"I'm takin' them now."

"Why? Because them two long-rope artists you've got with yuh are afraid to show themselves around here in daylight?" snarled Boyd. "If you figured you was right in this, you wouldn't have to be sneakin' around in the dark. The company you're in makes you on the wrong side of the fence, kid. Cass and Jess Boone being in on this makes it a plain steal!"

IT was reckless talk, dangerous talk, and it found its answer in a bullet that screamed past Boyd's head, coming from the left of where he sat his horse. He cursed, dragged his gun and spurred his horse straight at the spot from where the shot had come. Two more flashes of orange flame licked out at him. Boyd stiffened in the saddle as one of the heavy slugs tore through his side.

His own gun started spewing lead then. Two shots he unraveled before another bullet, deliberately aimed and coming from still farther to his left, plowed a furrow along the side of his head. The jolt deadened his senses and knocked him from the saddle. He struck the ground headlong, slid to a stop and lay still.

The next thing he knew it was daylight. He looked around, saw that he was in his own bed at the Block L ranch house. Doctor Harmon was standing beside the window looking out. As Boyd stirred he turned, came over to the bed.

"How do you feel?" he asked.

"Weak," muttered Boyd.

"You should," grunted Harmon. "You damn near bled out before Russ Kenrick found you about daylight. Lucky for you the blood clotted or you'd have been a goner." He smiled thinly. "You're tough. I didn't look for you to come around for a day or two. How does your head feel?"

"It don't feel," muttered Boyd thickly, his eyelids drooping heavily.

"Still numb, eh?"

"What—happened?"

"That's what I'm waiting to find out," replied Harmon. "Russ found a break in your east fence and saw where a herd of cows had passed on out. He rode in through the break to investigate and found you. He bound you up the best he could and then came racing into town after me. We fetched you up here in the buggy. What all happened?"

But Boyd Coleman was not listening. His eyes had closed and he had dropped off into a heavy sleep. Doctor Harmon felt of his pulse.

"Sleep is about the best thing you can get right now," he muttered aloud. "I've got to make a call down in Calido, but I'll be back later," he promised as he left his patient. . . .

Doctor Harmon climbed into his buggy and drove out of the yard. Shortly before dusk he topped the summit of a long grade five miles north of Calido. He quickly pulled off to one side of the road, as the white faces of several Hereford steers came into view from the opposite side of the ridge. Then the point rider crossed in front of them and reined his horse toward the doctor's buggy. Harmon recognized him as one of the J K Connected riders.

"Better keep to one side, Doc, till we get this herd over the hump," he advised.

Harmon nodded, wrapped the lines around his whip and watched a stream of Block L steers flow by him. Presently out of the cloud of dust they raised, another horseman emerged, dismounted near the buggy.

"Howdy, Doc," he said.

"Hello, Russ," answered Harmon. "Where are you going with these Block L steers?"

"Takin' them home," said Russ Kenrick. "We run onto them holed up in a box canyon down in the lower Piutes."

The eyes of the two men locked and held. "Seems like this bunch drifted out of the Block L pasture early last night," went on Russ. "That part of it might have been all right, but greed got to workin' on somebody an' they picked up some few J K Connected critters. Maybe you've spotted some of them while they've trailed by. We counted better than a dozen before we decided we had evidence enough."

Harmon nodded sagely. "Is that canyon very far off the road?"

"Quite a drift," said Russ. "But there's another one with a shack in it that ain't only about a mile. Might pay you to drive back in there, Doc. Interesting country. You might see some queer sights. When you come to the old wood road leadin' east out of the basin below, just kinda bend your horse into it an' drive for about a mile."

"Thanks, I will," muttered Harmon.

"Might interest you to know that we found gold an' paper money back in there," said Russ. "Got it strapped around my middle right now. Going to give it to a friend of mine."

"And mine."

"Ours," said Russ.

The last of the cattle had passed. Two riders bringing up the drag paused, then waved and rode on.

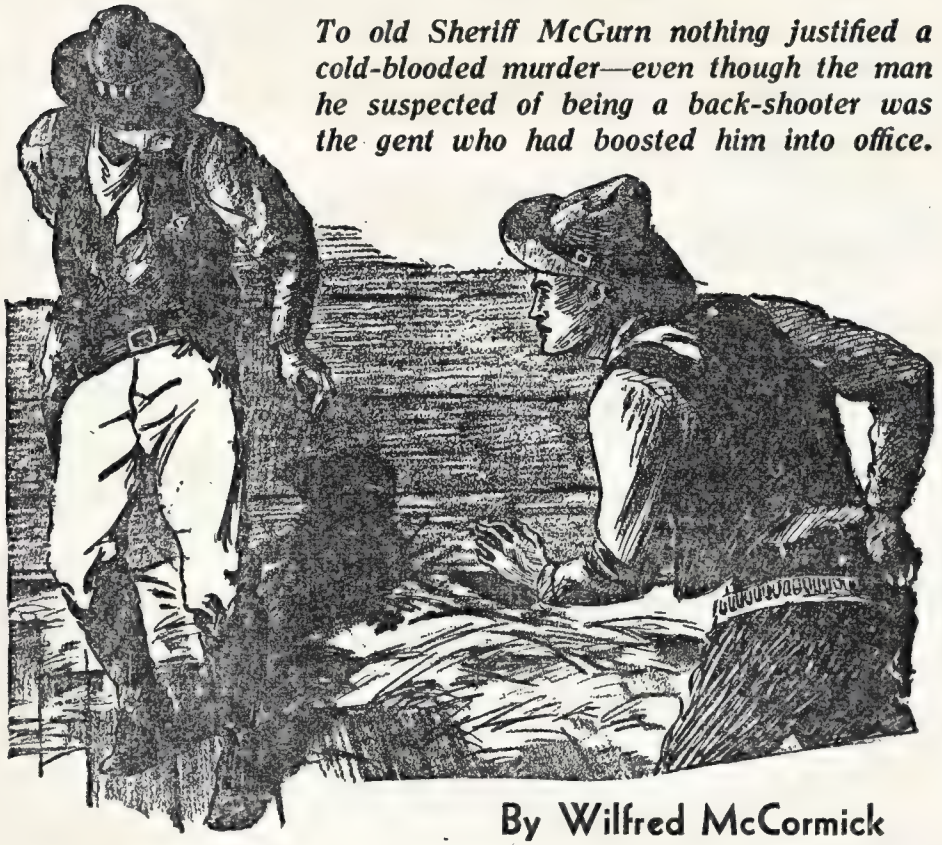
"Well, I gotta be goin', Doc. Don't guess these steers will decide to stray again. But then everybody makes mistakes. Even steers."

Doctor Harmon watched him mount and ride out of sight, then turned back into the road and drove down into the basin below. He followed Russ Kenrick's directions, turned onto the old road leading east into the hills. So he became the first wayfarer to see the big live oak, gruesome with its three eerie shapes that looked like nothing so much as long, dark pods swaying gently.

Vance Landers had been found, tried and convicted in bad company and, as Russ Kenrick had said: "A rope has no conscience."

Hogtied Justice

To old Sheriff McGurn nothing justified a cold-blooded murder—even though the man he suspected of being a back-shooter was the gent who had boosted him into office.



By Wilfred McCormick

"SHERIFF, I claim you're plumb, tee-totally crazy!" The remark was typical of old "Dad" Jessup—blunt, straight from the shoulder, exactly the thought that was in his mind at the moment.

And coming from the best friend he had, the newly elected sheriff of Pecos County took no offense. He merely smiled. Leaning back in his rickety chair, he crossed a pair of lean-shanked legs. His narrowed, thoughtful gaze wandered about the dingy little one-room shack. Finally it came to rest on a grimy kerosene lantern that flickered on the crude table separating the two men.

Outside, the steady drip of an afternoon-long rain pattered monotonously.

"It appears that I've read some place," Sheriff John McGurn drawled, after a moment, "that a wise man changes his mind, but a fool usually holds straight to one track. So I reckon that makes my brand look mighty bad."

"Meanin' you won't change your mind?"

"No, I reckon not."

Old Dad Jessup gulped angrily. Then he ripped out a curse. Pounding his gnarled fist against the table top, he sputtered: "It's a plain case of

signin' your own death warrant! Why, dammit! King Tully will salivate you with forty bullets, before you can even start to pull a trigger."

"Maybe he will," said John McGurn. "An' maybe he won't. But I'll soon be findin' out. They say he's spendin' the night in town."

Once more old Dad started to turn loose with another of his scathing outbursts, but he checked the words in his throat. He gulped helplessly. With a despairing shrug of his slender, wizened shoulders, he lowered his eyes, beginning to tap nervously on the table.

"You don't have to tackle this job," he argued. "It would be plumb easy for you to dodge it. Fact is, outside of you an' me, an' King Tully himself, not a living soul knows that the dead man was King's own stepbrother. We're the only ones that heard him brag, the day he got drunk. Why don't you let things ride along as they are? Spratt Davis needed killin' anyhow."

"Maybe he did," said John McGurn. "An' maybe he didn't. But that ain't the point." Gradually the sheriff's lanky frame began to stiffen. He bent forward, leveling a stiff forefinger across the oilcloth table covering. "Now, see here, Dad," he continued, more briskly than he had spoken in months, "the voters of Pecos County figured I was the best man for this sheriff's job. They put me in office. So you wouldn't want me to lay down on them, would you?"

"In a case like this, yes!" Dad Jessup slid back his chair. He raised his small, wiry body to its stooped five-feet-five. Quivering with emotion, the little old fellow came around and laid his hand on the sheriff's shoulder.

"John," he said, "you're plumb, tee-totally wrong about this thing. Don't do it. A man in your county has died of lead poison—yes. Maybe it was murder. Probably so. But he was a worthless, no-account nester that hadn't any business takin' up a homestead on King Tully's best waterhole in the first place. Why, I don't blame King very much for—"

"The bullet," Sheriff John McGurn interrupted grimly, "was shot into the victim's back. I noticed that myself. An' besides, Spratt Davis didn't have no gun at the time to defend himself. That makes it cold-blooded, deliberate murder. I claim Tully's got to be arrested, an' I'm gonna take him to the coop myself tonight."

"But—but, dammit!" argued old Dad, growing warmer again. "You're plumb forgettin' that it was King Tully that put you in office."

"I ain't forgettin' nothin'," the sheriff growled. "Least of all, my duty to the people."

"But," continued Dad Jessup, "it was King Tully's influence that shoved you across the line a winner, ahead of young Danny Weaver. Don't you remember the talk King made that day at the schoolhouse? Seems like I can still hear him:

" 'Men,' he says, in that bull-like bellow of his, 'it's Honest John McGurn that we want for the job. Honest John will make us a hundred percent better sheriff than that pie-faced kid that's runnin' against him. He's a man that won't show fear or favor to nobody.' Don't you remember him sayin' that for you?"

John McGurn nodded. "Sure," he admitted. "An' that's just what I'm fixin' to do—look after this job without fear or favor, just like King promised folks I would."

Old Dad Jessup removed the hand from his friend's shoulder. He stroked it across his chin, the hand trembling noticeably.

"The best way," he opined, "would be to make a short stab at investigatin' the affair. Not much, but enough to show folks that you're on the job. Then it will soon blow over. Because, after all, everybody agrees that Spratt Davis really needed a killin'."

"That's no cause for murder," the sheriff declared stubbornly. "There's never no excuse for cold-blooded murder—never."

Old Dad shrugged his shoulders in a final despairing gesture. "I still claim," he muttered, "that you're plumb, tee-totally crazy."

SHERIFF JOHN McGURN suddenly uncoiled his lanky body. Jumping to his feet, he leaned far over the table. His clear blue eyes, usually quiet and sleepy-looking, were now an icy cold.

"You've already said a heap too much!" he snarled angrily. "From now on, we'll each one tend to his own business. Savvy that?"

The two glared straight into each other's eyes for nearly a full minute. Then they weakened. Thirty-five years of staunch, neighboring friendship lay behind them. They couldn't break off now. The tie had become too great. As if by common impulse, both extended a hand at the same time. They gripped warmly.

Then Dad Jessup buttoned his yellow slicker about his throat and turned to the door. He paused with his hand nervously twitching the knob.

"Good luck, you hard-headed old coot!" he called, grinning sourly. "An' don't forget that King Tully is the fastest gun-slinger that ever straddled horseflesh in Pecos County. An', John, he's a killer, hot-tempered as an old she-bear. He'll salivate you sure, if you rile him."

"Maybe he will," said Sheriff McGurn. "An' maybe he won't."

"Good luck!" repeated Dad Jessup.

He opened the door. A terrific clap of thunder rattled the house. Lightning made the place dazzling bright for an instant. Then it dulled into its former shadows from the flickering yellow light of the lantern. Both men exchanged nods. Dad Jessup hunched his shoulders, and strode out into the rain.

The sheriff stood for several minutes, his set gaze riveted on the door. Finally he turned. Mechanically he walked across the room to the head of his crude bunk. Reaching up, he took down a dust-coated cartridge belt and an old-style gun. He eyed them thoughtfully.

It had been many a year since he had last worn the outfit. He wondered if his hand would still be steady. Could he still snatch the gun from its holster with any of his former death-dealing speed? If he could still thumb the hammer with—

"The fastest gun-slinger in Pecos County," old Dad had said of King Tully.

The sheriff grunted at the thought. Give him back thirty-five years, and he could laugh at King's vaunted speed.

For John McGurn had not always been a mild-mannered, peace-loving man. Far from it. His earlier days in Texas had been quite the opposite, caused by the horrible murder of both his father and mother while he was a youngster still in his teens. Bandits had invaded the home one night after the McGurns had made their fall sale of cattle, taking the money and clubbing the pair to death when they tried to resist.

John, who had been attending a dance at a neighbor's that evening, promptly took the sundown trail after the killers. It was a long and bloody trail, packed with desperate gun battles, but one by one he had found his men, and beaten them. Only two of the original band of six survived when the rangers intervened. John himself became a hunted man because of his unofficial doings. He fled far over into the Pecos country, deciding finally that it was time to hang up his gun and forget the past.

He had done well; that is, until recent traces of the dreaded hoof and mouth disease had broken out among his stock. And although John was "West-wise" enough to know what the probable results would be, he had personally notified the Cattle Board. A brief inspection was sufficient. The entire herd was immediately condemned, and shot. Then his range was

set on fire to wipe out all germs of the extremely contagious disease.

It had been a staggering blow, but "Honest John"—as the Pecos folk had come to call him—took it with a grin. The grin was forced from a heavy heart, but not one person guessed the nerve-wracking effort required to keep it there.

The Stockman's State Bank had added the final punch. There had been a small mortgage on the cattle which John lost, and the greedy bank officials pressed him for a deed to the place in return for the unpaid loan. The land wasn't worth much at the time—wouldn't be until the following season—but they insisted on the swap. John had hesitated for a time. They had no legal way of forcing him to their terms, and he knew it. Ninety-nine men in a hundred would have refused flatly.

But Honest John McGurn saw the affair as one in a hundred would have seen it. He had taken their money—and he hadn't paid them back. So he signed the deed. His conscience was cleared.

AFTERWARDS, practically penniless, he had listened to King Tully's suggestion that he run for county sheriff. The suggestion seemed a good one. Of course, he had suspected from the first that King's chief reason for supporting him was a secret desire to block young Danny Weaver out of the job. King and Danny had never gotten along. However, he had entered the race. The election had been close, as young Danny wasn't a bad sort and was well qualified, but John McGurn had won out by a small majority.

And now, ironically, he was about to buckle the ancient six-gun around his hips and take the trail of the very man who had boosted him into office. It was tough, but—

John McGurn slowly shook his head. Then, as though the gun were poison, he tossed it aside on the bed.

"Not unless it's the only way," he muttered to himself.

Some five or ten minutes later, he had slipped into a shabby old slicker coat and was padding along Buckeye's muddy street toward the lighted section of town.

The little county seat had two gambling emporiums. Both seemed to be doing a thriving business that night, as evidenced by the numerous saddled ponies crowded into the hitchrails, their heads down and backs hunched from the drizzling downpour.

John McGurn paused in front of the first place, Pete's Black Cat. It seemed even busier than the more elaborate Silver Eagle across the street, but since it was usually frequented by a rougher, cheaper element the sheriff did not go inside. He considered it more likely that his man would be at the rival place, where better-fixed patrons usually gathered, and where the stakes were higher.

Accordingly, he tried the Silver Eagle first.

His hunch was correct. Pushing through the batwing double doors into the noisy, smoke-thickened interior, he elbowed his way through the half-drunk revelers to the gaming tables in the rear. And there he found his man.

King Tully sat at a round, flannel-covered poker table with three other players. Pressing about them on all sides, hushed bystanders watched the game with more than the usual amount of interest.

The sheriff edged closer. He saw that a huge pile of chips lay in the center of the table and that King Tully didn't have a single one left in front of him. Evidently King was gambling all he had on the cards which he now held in his hand.

John McGurn, more interested in watching the hawk-faced gunman himself than the tense play for the pot, ran his eyes over King Tully from head to foot.

King was taller than the average man, and his rangy shoulders draped

inside a tanned calfskin jacket showed plenty of well-distributed power. His nose was long, slightly humped in the middle, and his beady eyes seemed to be set unusually close together.

The sheriff noted, also, that King's right hand never strayed far from his hip, where a big forty-five was thonged to his thigh with a rawhide string. John McGurn had heard plenty of stories about how fast that gun could clear leather. Somehow, he wondered if—

But the men were talking.

"I may be throwin' good money to the wind," a swarthy, heavy-set gambler, seated directly across from King Tully, drawled in careless tones, "but I'm sure cravin' to see what you've got in your hand. Reckon I'll stay." He shoved his chips to the center.

King Tully threw down his hand. "Three aces an' a pair of queens!" he announced triumphantly. He started to rake in the pot.

"Just a minute!" The heavy-set gambler slowly exposed his own cards —four jacks, and the remaining ace.

King Tully snarled a curse. He pounded savagely on the table top, then rose to his feet.

"Damned rotten luck," he grumbled, "when a man can't win at straight poker with a full house. Let me out of here!"

The crowd shifted to let him through. But before he had taken a step, John McGurn laid a hand on his shoulder.

"I want to see you, Tully," the sheriff announced quietly.

King Tully turned. A trace of annoyance crossed his hard features. Then, recognizing the sheriff, he shook his head impatiently.

"Not tonight," he said. "I'm in a hurry to—"

"Sorry, Tully," Sheriff McGurn cut in sharply, "but I'm in somethin' of a hurry myself. An' it concerns you. We'll step back here to the little office room. Stand aside, men!"

King Tully did not move. His piercing black eyes bored straight into the calmer blue ones of the partly smiling sheriff.

"What do you want?" he growled, after a moment.

"I'd rather tell you in private."

"But I ain't got time. What is it?"

"I'd rather tell you in private," repeated the sheriff.

"You'll tell me right here, or not at all!" King Tully roared, suddenly losing all patience at the other's quiet, confident manner. "I'm in a hurry, I said. So if you've got any business with me, you'll have to get it—"

"My business," Sheriff John McGurn interrupted calmly, "is to take you to jail. Tully, you're under arrest."

THE big gunman's lower jaw seemed to drop almost to his collarbone. A livid flush crimsoned his hollow cheeks. He forced a short laugh, but the laugh was noticeably high-pitched and forced.

"Why, you ain't even got a gun!" he scoffed. "Do you think I'm a damned baby?"

"Maybe I do," the sheriff said evenly. "An' maybe I don't. But that don't matter. Fact is, I'm takin' you to jail."

"What's the charge?"

"Murder."

King Tully spat to one side indignantly. He drew the leather jacket sleeve across his mouth.

"Who do you claim I killed?" he demanded.

"Your stepbrother, Spratt Davis."

Again the big fellow laughed mirthlessly. "If you're tryin' to frame me," he blustered, "you're playin' with red-hot dynamite. I didn't kill Spratt Davis, an' I won't go to jail," he added firmly.

"You did, an' you are!" Sheriff McGurn replied, just as firmly.

An audible snicker swept through the crowd. King Tully bit his lip. Suddenly he whirled with the savagery of a trapped wildcat.

"You see?" he roared to the bystanders. "This is what a man gets for doin' a good turn. I put this locoed, decrepit old codger in office—keep him from starvin' to death. Now he trumps up a fake murder charge against me, the second day he holds his job. I tell you, men, it's a plain case of bitin' the hand that's fed him. An' I won't ever see the inside of no jail, either, on— Take your paw down!"

John McGurn had gripped him by the shoulder.

"Just as well come along," the sheriff advised. "You can make your speeches to the jury."

"The hell I will!"

King Tully's right hand swooped down. The big forty-five seemed to leap upward to meet it. In the flash of an eye, the gun muzzle was buried in the sheriff's waist. King Tully leaned close, thrusting his chin forward.

"For the price of a bullet," he gritted, "I'd blow a hole plumb through you! But you ain't worth it. Now get out of here!"

Sheriff John McGurn smiled coldly. "Sure," he agreed. "You hold the best cards, for the present. But I'll be back here inside five minutes—with a gun of my own. I'd sure hoped it wouldn't be necessary, on account of what you did for me. But you're either goin' to jail, or on a one-way trip to boot hill."

"You'll never come back!" scoffed Tully.

"Five minutes, I said."

The sheriff's level, even tones sounded convincing, and confident. He turned away. The crowd parted, allowing him to pass through. Halfway to the door, however, a heavy hand caught him by the elbow. He stopped. King Tully whirled him around, their eyes again riveted on each other.

"Maybe we'd best settle the whole thing," King Tully rasped, low enough that none of the bystanders caught his words. "Get it settled, once an' for all.

"I don't savvy," the sheriff muttered dazedly. "What are you drivin' at?"

Then King Tully did a strange thing. He cupped a hand to the sheriff's ear. "Listen!" he whispered. "I was with Dub Oliver. Me an' Spratt both. Does that mean anything to you?"

The color drained from John McGurn's sun-bronzed cheeks. He stood as though frozen to the spot. It was several minutes before he was able to find words. Then he nodded.

"I get the idea," he said hoarsely. "It's a smooth trap, but I'll walk straight into it. You wait here five minutes for me."

"Here, an' ready!" snapped the gunman.

Sheriff John McGurn spun on his heel. He reached the double swinging doors in three rapid strides, moving faster than any of those present had ever seen him move. The door clicked shut behind him. Almost at a run, he splashed west along the muddy street toward the little shack that had recently been his home.

He covered the distance in record time. And inside the musty shack, he lighted the lantern with fingers that fairly trembled from eagerness. He turned to the bed. There his eyes widened—first with surprise, then anger. The gun and belt were both gone. Somebody had been in the room since he had left it.

He glanced around hurriedly. Over beside the door, he read the answer—old Dad Jessup. There was no mistaking the size or the shape of the muddy tracks clearly outlined on the floor. Dad had the smallest foot in the country, and his left boot always turned in sharply at the toe. The sheriff cursed softly to himself.

What did old Dad want with his gun anyhow? And this, of all times! Maybe Dad was trying to help him out? Maybe intending to tackle King Tully himself?

Surely not. Much as he blustered and stormed around, old Dad was really quite harmless—the last man in a thousand to butt deliberately into a six-shooter quarrel. Why, as far back as the sheriff could remember, he had never once seen old Dad even carry a gun.

Still, the gun and belt were gone, and Dad Jessup had undoubtedly taken both. But what was the idea?

The sheriff scratched his head.

Well, that could be straightened out later. In the meantime, he would have to find Dad and the gun. In five minutes, he had promised King Tully. He would have to hurry.

SHERIFF JOHN McGURN left the house at a run. He went first to Buckeye's lone hotel, a bulky, frame affair with a light burning dimly in the front window. A sleepy-eyed clerk said Dad usually spent his evenings there with them, but on this particular night he hadn't been around at all. The sheriff rushed on down the street. He turned in at the Black Cat.

His luck was some better here. The proprietor said that Dad had just left the place. Where was he going? Well, it seemed like he had mentioned something about going over to the Silver Eagle to look for King Tully. Did he seem excited, like maybe he was hunting for trouble? Well, yes—it seemed like he did. But beyond that, the proprietor could not say.

The information came like a slap in the face to John McGurn. Old Dad, he knew, didn't have any business tackling a gunman of King Tully's caliber. Not the slightest. And unless a miracle had happened to prevent, the old fellow might even now be stretched on the floor—another easy victim for King's growing list.

But valuable time was passing. Thoroughly alarmed for the safety of his impetuous friend, John McGurn rushed out the front door. A muddy pool tripped him. He fell heavily. Plastered from head to foot with cold, slimy mud, he scrambled again to his feet. He fairly raced across the street to the gaudily lighted Silver Eagle.

He reached the swinging doors. Without hesitation, he shoved them violently open. Only two men were in the long room. Everybody else had fled. King Tully was over to one side, his back leaned against the bar. A steady-muzzled six-gun showed his talonlike fingers. Out in the middle of the room was Dad Jessup. Both Dad's hands were raised high in the air. And on the floor in front of him, was John McGurn's old-style gun which Dad had evidently been forced to drop.

As the sheriff rushed into the place, both men turned. King Tully recognized him instantly. King's gun muzzle belched flame. The sheriff pitched forward. He fell flat on his face, conscious only of a burning, deadening sensation somewhere about his waist. He tried to move, but his muscles failed to respond.

Slowly, laboriously, he managed to open his eyes. He saw King Tully gliding toward him. King's face was rigidly set in the maniacal gleam of a crazed killer. The big revolver moved downward. Its still smoking muzzle came within a foot of the sheriff's eyes. The sheriff saw King's finger beginning to tighten on the trigger. He held his breath.

It was old Dad Jessup that intervened. Springing over in front of King Tully with the agility of a scared mountain goat, he grabbed hold of the gunman's arm.

"Stop! Stop, you i d i o t!" he screamed. "It's murder! The sheriff ain't got a gun to defend himself. Any jury in the country would hang you for murder if—"

King Tully, crazed though he was, had sense enough to realize the situation. He whirled. He shoved Dad Jessup savagely to one side. Then he reached out with his boot toe and slid the discarded old weapon close to the sheriff's hand.

"There!" he sneered. "Now it won't be murder!"

Again old Dad Jessup dived recklessly forward to interfere.

"Don't take that gun, sheriff!" he screamed. "It won't shoot! It's busted some way. The trigger wouldn't work, or I'd have killed the skunk myself a minute ago. If you don't even touch the gun, we can swear it was murder, because—"

King Tully cut the old fellow short with a cry like a wounded panther. He swung his gun around. The heavy steel barrel caught Dad Jessup a terrific blow on the side of the head. Old Dad sank to his knees. Then rolled over on his back.

The gunman turned again to Sheriff John McGurn. "Now for you!" he hissed savagely. "Just like me an' the rest of Dub Oliver's gang fixed your daddy an' mammy! Say your prayers, you meddlin', decrepit old coot! I'm goin' to fix you, like I fixed Spratt Davis—for not mindin' your own business. Here!" King Tully thrust the old six-gun into the sheriff's fingers. "Now it won't be murder!"

John McGurn, gritting his teeth for a last supreme effort, stared up at the cruel, merciless face just above him. "King—King," he faltered, "I'm warnin' you. We're—we're on even terms now. This gun will—"

King Tully's harsh, maniacal laugh broke into the sheriff's words. He was already lowering his six-shooter again for the last murderous shot.

But King's gun was never fired. Just as the blunt barrel came down into line with Sheriff McGurn's pain-whitened face, the stricken officer pulled his own weapon upward. Two quick shots crashed from its muzzle —two shots so rapidly fired that they sounded as one prolonged blast.

A stunned, sickened look came over King Tully's flushed features. He stood swaying for a moment. Then he spun half around, slumping to the floor. A horrible, gurgling gasp broke from his lips as his body stiffened into everlasting stillness.

Sheriff John McGurn summoned all his strength. He pulled his knees forward. But as he started to rise, a hand clutched him by the shoulder and forced him down again. He turned sideways, glancing up.

Dad Jessup was bending over him. Dad's face was bloody and he was tottering unsteadily, but he wore a grin that wouldn't come off.

"Take it easy, old-timer," he said. "You'll pull through all right. You've got to, because the county can't get along without you from now on. An' just as soon as you're able to talk, I want to know what happened to that no-account gun. The trigger wouldn't work at all for me, but it sure sprayed plenty of lead poison when you—"

The sheriff smiled faintly. "When I used to be young, an' somethin' of a gun-toter myself," he explained, "I didn't use the trigger anyway."

"But—but how did—"

"See here—" John McGurn held up the stiffened forefinger on his right hand——"I broke this first joint," he went on to explain, "when I was still just a kid. It wasn't set right, an' has been stiff ever since. So I disconnected the trigger entirely. Then learned to work the hammer with my thumb. It's just as accurate, an' a heap faster."

"No wonder you wasn't scared of King Tully. I claim them was the fastest two shots that ever poured out of a six-gun."

"Maybe they was," grinned Sheriff McGurn. "An' maybe they wasn't. But they got the job done, just the same. So I'm gonna ask you about somethin' you mentioned earlier this evenin'—somethin' about a crazy man. Was it you, or me?"

"Me!" old Dad Jessup admitted promptly. "Plumb, tee-totally crazy. An' glad of it!"

STAMPEDE

Where our reading and writing waddies get together with POWDER RIVER BILL

HUNKER DOWN an' make yourselves right to home. We'll start this tongue-fannin' ruckus with two young hombresses from Jackson, Michigan. Here they are, folks. Miss Mary an' Miss Elizabeth.

Dear Powder River Bill:

Just happened to buy a WESTERN TRAILS magazine and found it very interesting. Keep the good stories coming.

May two lonely farmerettes give a call for Pen Pards. One of us—Mary by name, has dark brown hair, hazel eyes, is 5 feet 4 inches tall and weighs 142 pounds. She is very interested in horses and horsemen. Anyone liking horses is more than welcome.

The other—Elizabeth, is a blonde, has blue eyes, is 5 feet 7 inches tall and weighs 145 pounds. She is also very much interested in horses and also in drawing and painting, photography and swimming.

We will be glad to exchange photographs and will answer all letters promptly.

Good luck to W. T.

Sincerely yours,

MARY B. RYAN.
ELIZABETH RINGS.

R. F. D. 3,
Jackson, Mich.

That was some drawin', Miss Elizabeth. I'm hangin' it on the bunkhouse wall. Sure is a humdinger. Is that Miss Mary on the horse, or is it you? Anyway, come again right soon. . . .

An' here's a wrasslin' gent from Spokane, Washington. What's more, he's a light-hearted gent. An' still what's more, he's gonna be a sad-hearted gent if you purty hombresses don't sling a mite of ink his way. Step up, Jack.

Dear Powder River Bill:

Being a regular reader of your magazine, I've decided to take advantage of the opportunity the *Stampede* offers we lonesome ones.

This is my first quest for Pen Pards and I sincerely hope that it is successful.

I am a young man of 24 years, weigh 185 pounds and am 6 feet 2 inches tall. I have blond wavy hair. My favorite pastimes are wrestling, swimming, and sleeping. I am exceptionally light-hearted and so I should make a cheerful correspondent. Moreover, I'm not averse to travelling, so I might even make a personal appearance—if properly approached. So come on, Miss America, and write to me!

Now, listen, Bill, I won't be anything but

PARDNER PETE'S Bunkhouse Bulletin

Pen Pards who would like an ink sketch o' their snapshot, send it to—

DAVID JEROME
539 Brompton Place
Chicago, Illinois

Pen Pards who would like cowboy songs, write to—

VICTOR MARKS
7127 S. Washtenaw Avenue
Chicago, Ill.

Pen Pards who would like poetry written 'bout their picture send it to—

CHARLES J. HERBERT, JR.
c/o Victor St. James
Whittemore, Michigan

—and—

STANLEY C. DeCAMP
c/o Gen'l Delivery, Galion, Ohio

sad if this doesn't appear in my next issue of WESTERN TRAILS. Thanks, pardner.

Yours,
JACK MEREDITH.

117½ North Howard St.,
Spokane, Wash.

Well, Jack, ole Bill is doin' his part to keep that sad-hearted brand from stampin' your hide. It's up to the hombresses now. Let me know, amigo. . . .

Move over, folks. Here's a black curly-headed filly what's willin' to exchange snaps. Meet Miss Betty from West Virginia.

Dear Bill:

I have been reading WESTERN TRAILS for many months. I think the stories are splendid. I am hoping that this letter will find a place in your magazine.

I am a young girl of seventeen, have black curly hair, brown eyes and weigh 120. I am five feet and a half inch tall. I would like some Pen Pards from all over the world. Mostly from real cowboys. I will exchange snapshots with everyone who writes. So everyone take their trusty pen in their hands and come to my rescue.

Yours truly,
ELIZABETH JETT.

Ward, W. Va.

Thanks for joinin' up with us, Miss Betty. Don't be a stranger. . . .

Jack here, from up New York way, is caterwaulin' for a break. Well, he's sure come to the right place. The best hombres an' hombresses in the whole world meet in these diggin's. Make room for Jack, you jaspers.

Dear Bill:

This is the second time I've written you. I don't know, maybe my other letter got lost in the mail. Will you please give me a break and publish my letter this time?

I am a young fellow with a little college education and ordinary tastes—and lonesome a-plenty. If there's any place you can get real lonesomeness of the Grade A kind, that's a big city like New York! My hobbies are reading, basketball, and wireless telegraphy. Will answer every letter I receive from man or woman. Here's hopin' I get plenty mail—pronto!

JACK ROSEN.

1013 Kelly St.,
Bronx, N. Y.

Lissen, Jack, you musta licked the stamp so hard that last time that you up an' swallowed it without knowin'. Keep me posted on how you make out with the folks. . . .

This hombress from Arkansas sorta cottons to Bert Little. I'll let her tell you-all 'bout it.

Hello Bill:

I have read all kinds of western magazines. But I think WESTERN TRAILS is the most thrilling.

I'm a school girl sixteen years young, have black hair, brown eyes, weight 115, height 5 feet 2 inches. I like all sports, especially dancing, riding, swimming, skating, playing cards and all of the others. I also love writing letters. I can't hardly wait from month to month for "Bert Little."

I want Pen Pards from everywhere especially from the cowboys of the West. I will answer all letters from both girls and boys.

So long, Bill.

Sincerely yours,
VIOLA FLETCHER.

Green Forest,
Arkansas.

Jus' wait, Miss Viola, an' your favorite Bert Little will soon come a-ridin' along on King, with Buck at his side. An' in the meantime, you might tell Yqres Trooly how you like

For the protection of our readers, WESTERN TRAILS reserves the right to open all Pen Pard mail passing through our hands.

this here issue. Don't be a stranger, senorita. . . .

Shake hands with Russ, folks. He's a lonely hombre from Baltimore. Maybe he's that big, bad man they sing songs 'bout. Iff'n he is, we'll set Buck to gnawin' on his ankle. Meet Russ. . . .

Dear Bill:

I've been reading WESTERN TRAILS magazine for over five years, and I find W. T. to be my favorite in Western stories.

I would like to find some Pen Pards who would write to me, for I am very lonely.

I am 25, 5 foot 7 inches, 157 pounds, brown eyes, dark black hair, fair tan complexion, and have a very nice disposition. I would like to hear from anyone from 16 to 35, man, woman, widow or young pretty ladies. I promise to answer all letters, and I promise to be a sport and full of fun. So come one come all, from here, there and everywhere.

Adios, mio amigos.

Hasta la vista.

Lonely,
RUSSELL GULIUSSO.

610 N. Monroe St.,
Balto, Md.

Thanks for comin', Russ. An' listen—take a tip from an ole cowhand. Instead o' waitin' around for hombresses to write to you, why don'tcha wrassle with your pen an' whirl some letters to the hombresses what are right here at this meetin'? Keep in touch with Yores Trooly. . . .

An' now, meet up with a gent who lives "Out Where the West Begins." He has a hobby o' collectin' songs an' cards from all over the West. Shove over, folks, an' make room for Raymond.

Dear Bill:

Although I am a steady reader of WESTERN TRAILS this is the first time I am writing.

I live in Ogallala, "Out Where the West Begins." That's what everybody calls it. And, believe you me, out here on the ranch is just like the West and no fooling.

Well, I would like letters from all Pen Pards and will answer them all. I am eighteen years old and my hobby is collecting songs and cards from all over the West.

Hoping to hear from some Pards soon.

Sincerely yours,
RAYMOND MARTINEZ.

Ogallala, Nebraska.
Box 422,

Well, Raymond, I reckon there are plenty o' hombres an' hombresses with a heap o' songs an' cards to exchange with you. Jus' take a squint at Pardner Pete's Bunkhouse Bulletin. Bee seein' you. . . .

Now, folks, you-all better take a squint at this here Tophand Author's Bulletin. It's an easy way to tell Yores Trooly what writers an' stories you like best. Jus' put a "1"—"2"—"3"—"4"——an' so on in the empty box beside the author's name.

The best o' luck to you-all till the next meetin' o' the ole Stampede.

Tophand Author's Ballot

WESTERN TRAILS
67 West 44th Street, New York, N. Y.

ANDOR DE SOOS *Pistol Patrol on the Panhandle*	___
CLAUDE RISTER *Coyote Laughter*	___
DEAN OWEN *Owl-Hooter's Gun Code*	___
JACK DRUMMOND *Long-Rope Harvest*	___
WILFRED McCORMICK *Hogtied Justice*	___
FRANK CARL YOUNG *The Lobo Locksmith*	___
JAMES R. WEBB *Hangtree Haunted*	___
CHARLES W. TYLER *Powdersmoke Payroll*	___

Name .....

Address .....

The Lobo Locksmith

By Frank Carl Young

Pin-Wrist Garret teaches a shifty-eyed hombre a few tricks about manacle magic.

THE brassy Arizona sun gleamed on the steel handcuffs that manacled the small, lean man's wrists. It made deep, black shadows within his empty holsters. Time and again he turned his thin, gaunt face to glance anxiously back over the surging hips of his sorrel, as if to catch a glimpse of his pursuers in the hazy, wavering distance of cholla and cacti-studded plain.

Before him, and within a mile, rose the brushy carpeted foothills. Deep, sharp-sided gullies slotted twistingly into them. Within their bewildering maze a posse could make a fruitless search for days.

As the sorrel clattered into the quiet coolness of the ravine, the lean rider's furtive eyes darted right and left. Piñon pine and mountain cedar blocked his searching gaze. A mountain jay fluttered past his shoulder, caused him to jerk his head in that direction. Every crash of the sorrel's hoofs on the stony bed of the coulee seemed to jar him into more rigid tenseness, to sharpen his wariness.

Clattering around a sharp bend in the gully, the small man suddenly brought the sorrel to an abrupt halt. To the right, and about fifty yards ahead, stood a rock hut. With its single, glassless window and heavy, closed door, it stood compact and lonely in a rather large clearing a hundred feet up the slope. A dozen steps to one side of it was a wooden bucket in a tiny, grassy pocket from which a sun-silvered trickle of water corkscrewed down the slope among the rocks.

The rider shot a quick, anxious glance over his shoulder, as if he had caught sounds of pursuit down the gully. Then his cunning eyes nar-

rowed contemplatively on the bucket and the spring beside it.

The thin fugitive shrugged his shoulders, tickled the sorrel with his gut-hooks, rode up the slope. Dismounting beside the spring, he kneeled beside the grass-girdled pocket of cool water and thrust both hands into it above the wrists.

The thick door of the hut stirred, opened an inch. The creak of it caused the lean man hunkered above the spring to stiffen, tighten his thin lips.

"Stay as yuh are, or I'll kill you!"

The hunched figure at the spring froze into statuesque immobility. His manacled wrists remained in the cool water. His furtive eyes seemed fascinated with the bubbling spring, remained fixed, unblinking.

"Mebby I'll kill yuh anyway!"

THE voice of the figure standing spraddle-legged in the open doorway was similar to his sinister appearance—coarse, rough, v i c i o u s. Tiny, glittering eyes stabbed out from cavernous sockets on either side of a flat, broken nose. Sunlight put stripes of fire into his bright, red hair, glinted on the heavy Colt clutched in his thick, knob-knuckled fist.

The thin fugitive at the spring remained like a statue carved from granite. Not a muscle twitched as the occupant of the hut crunched across the gravelly dooryard and towered above his stooped figure.

"I ain't likin' strange hombres to wash their dirty paws in my spring!" growled the one with the gun. "Who in hell do yuh figure yuh are, anyway?"

The lean one with his wrists in the water twisted his head, peered appealingly into the hard, vicious features above him. Then he lifted his hands from the spring, held them out explanatorily. The sun flashed down on the steel that bound them.

"I'm Pin-Wrist Garret," he replied meekly. "I didn't figure anybody bunked here. Saw this water an' jes' had to have it to git these damn irons off."

The moment Garret stood up, the gun in the other's fist was rammed into his ribs, shoved him back a step. The red-haired one's tiny, piercing eyes glued to the handcuffs, the empty holsters on the lean thighs.

"Don't try to git funny with Jack Smith!" he snapped. "This cocky yarn about gittin' handcuffs off with water—think I believe that? What do yuh *really* want?"

Pin-Wrist Garret seemed to cringe back. "Jes' like I said, Smith. Some cold water to git these wristbands off. I've done it more than once." He shot a worried glance along his back trail leading out of the gully. "But I guess I ain't got time now. I only had a couple of spare minutes. You used them all up. I gotta push along now until I c'n find another spot—more private. That posse is too close!"

A cunning, reluctant expression dawned in Smith's features. "Wait a minute, Garret!" he barked. "Git in that hut! I'll bring up a bucket of water. Now move!"

Garret instantly hesitated, glancing sharply at Smith. "An' then lock me in, eh?" he chortled, some of his meekness gone. "Bounty hunter, eh? I don't know you, Smith. I'll take my chances along the trail—if I got any."

Smith gave him a vicious shove toward the rock hut and tilted his gun. "Ever hear of Pete Morgan? He's the killin'est an' smartest outlaw that ever hit these hills. Never gits caught, an' there ain't a lawman in five hundred miles with guts enough to hunt him down. He spraddles 'em all out full of lead! Wal, Garret, Pete Morgan's a friend of mine, see? Sometimes when he's on the duck, he stops in my place here for a breather."

Still the frown of concern didn't leave Pin-Wrist's lean face. "How do I know that ain't a stall? An' what about that law bunch tailin' me right now? Even if I could be sure of you, that ain't stoppin' 'em!"

Smith kept his gun level, then dipped the bucket into the spring with his free hand, brought it up brimming full.

"Never mind them," he replied. "This place is like a fort, an' I'll keep my eyes peeled while yuh work. But you're gonna show me how water shucks wrist irons, or I'll blow yuh apart an' turn yuh over to your posse friends! 'Cause if it c'n be done, I'm passin' on the dope to Pete Morgan, my friend."

Garret's eyes pleaded, his lean face writhed with entreaty. "But, hell, Smith, one man can't hold off that sheriff an' his men! Let me git movin'!"

Jack Smith sneered contemptuously. "Stop mouthin', yuh jelly-spined rat! I'll take care of any law hombres that try to bother yuh—that is, if yuh can git them irons off like yuh said." And Smith laughed.

THE interior of the hut was poorly lighted and as badly furnished. Setting the bucket down in front of Garret, Smith's glance went to the fugitive's empty holsters, then to the shackled wrists. Approval shone in his eyes.

"Git workin', Garret!"

Pin-Wrist Garret gulped, then stuck his hands into the cool water. For five minutes he kept them there, explaining in a faltering voice:

"Cold water thins the—the blood, shrivels your hands kinda like. That's only p-part of it. Yuh gotta know how to work the knuckles of your fingers, too. Jes' watchin' me will—will only give yuh an idea how it's done, 'cause it's better—better to have 'em on to understand the bone part. Only I won't have time to show yuh that, Smith." Garret suddenly broke off, shot a terrified glance toward the open door. "What was that?"

Smith gave a scornful laugh. "You're as jumpy as popcorn! Didn't hear a thing m'self!"

Garret gave a sigh of relief, pulled his wet wrists from the bucket of cold water. Then carefully, and ever so painstakingly, he worked the steel band on his left wrist over the back of his hand until it reached the knuckles of his fingers and thumb. At this point, he folded his thumb into his palm. Then with his other hand, he crushed together the knuckles of his fingers at the same time forcing the band over them. Likewise, he freed his other hand.

"Cripes—Pete Morgan can sure use an idea like that!" Smith gasped.

Garret smiled wanly, then stood up. Stuffing the handcuffs into his pocket, he rubbed his wrists and headed for the door.

"Wouldn't mind tyin' up with this gent yuh call Pete Morgan," he said, admiration threading his voice. "Him an' me oughta be able to do pretty good together. But hell, I never git around to meetin' the right hombres. Besides, I got to be hittin' out of here pronto. That posse—"

Smith's eyes were glowing, as he caught Garret, by the arm. "Listen, Garret, I might be able to fix it with —with Morgan, yuh know. That little trick of yours with those cuffs would do it, I think. But I'd have to know exactly how to work it, see—I mean the bone part."

Garret frowned and pulled away. "Sorry, Smith, but the hombres in that posse that's huntin' me ain't gonna be waitin' elsewhere fer me to finish makin' demonstrations. I'm ridin'!"

"The hell yuh are!" growled Smith, yanking him back into the room. "You're showin' me, or I'll slap yuh all over these rock walls!"

Mollified, Garret cast a wistful glance toward the open door. Then pulling the wrist irons from his pocket, he threw them at Smith.

"You win," he groaned. "Put them on, then, an' I'll show yuh."

Smith caught them, stared blankly at Garret. "They're still c l o s e d, locked. I can't git 'em on this way, yuh damn fool!"

"I forgot. Give 'em back. I've

picked more than one lock with a horseshoe nail."

As Garret took the long nail from his vest pocket, Smith's eyes narrowed suspiciously.

"Say, if yuh can pick that lock, why in hell didn't yuh do that in the first place instead of soakin' yuhr wrists?"

Garret sniffed contemptuously. "How could I? When your wrists are only two inches apart it's impossible to bend your fingers down so's to pick a lock—especially when the keyhole is on the side of the lock toward your body."

Smith scratched his head. "I hadn't thought about that. You're right."

Suddenly Garret jerked rigid, his eyes stabbing toward the open door. "I heard somethin' that time, Smith! Take a look-see, will yuh? Hell, man, if they find me—" He broke off the thought, seemed to finish it within his mind.

Smith gave him a withering, cynical sneer. Nevertheless, he walked to the door and stood for a moment scanning the gully and the stony trail winding down to the plain. When he returned, Garret tossed the handcuffs to him. They were open.

"Damn if I c'n figure how a molly-coddle like you could git in trouble," mumbled Smith as he snapped on the wrist cuffs. "Now what do I do?"

Garret pointed to the bucket of cold water on the floor. "Yuh gotta stick your hands in there. Remember what I told yuh about thinnin' the blood so's to make your hands smaller? Wal, you're pretty big, yuh know."

Obediently, Smith got to his knees, jammed his fleshy hands into the cool spring water. At the same moment his manacled wrists disappeared into the bucket, Garret calmly reached down and plucked his gun.

Smith paled, cursed. Jerking his fists from the water, he glared hotly at Garret and his own gun staring him in the face.

"What—what the hell is the idea, Garret?" he demanded, the jangling handcuffs blending with the piercing sharpness of his voice. "Put that gun back, yuh little squirt, an' finish tellin' me how to git these damn shackles off!"

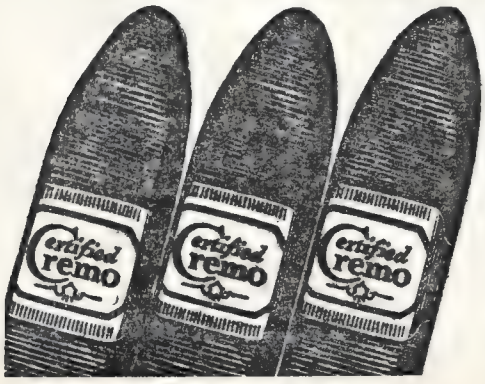
"Here's how!" And Garret grinned triumphantly as he held up the key he had used instead of the nail when Smith had gone to the door. "Git up on your feet, yuh rat!"

Smith's tiny, pig eyes became ugly red with fierce rage.

"Why, damn yuh, Garret, yuh don't know who I am! I'm not Jack Smith. That was jes' a stall. I'm the gent yuh wanted to tie up with, the killer who never gits caught. Why I can blast a dozen lawmen to dust with that gun any time, day or night. I'm Pete Morgan!"

Garret laughed and prodded the outlaw with his gun.

"Now isn't that jes' dandy? I'm Jeff Chambers—the new marshal of Dusty Forks!"



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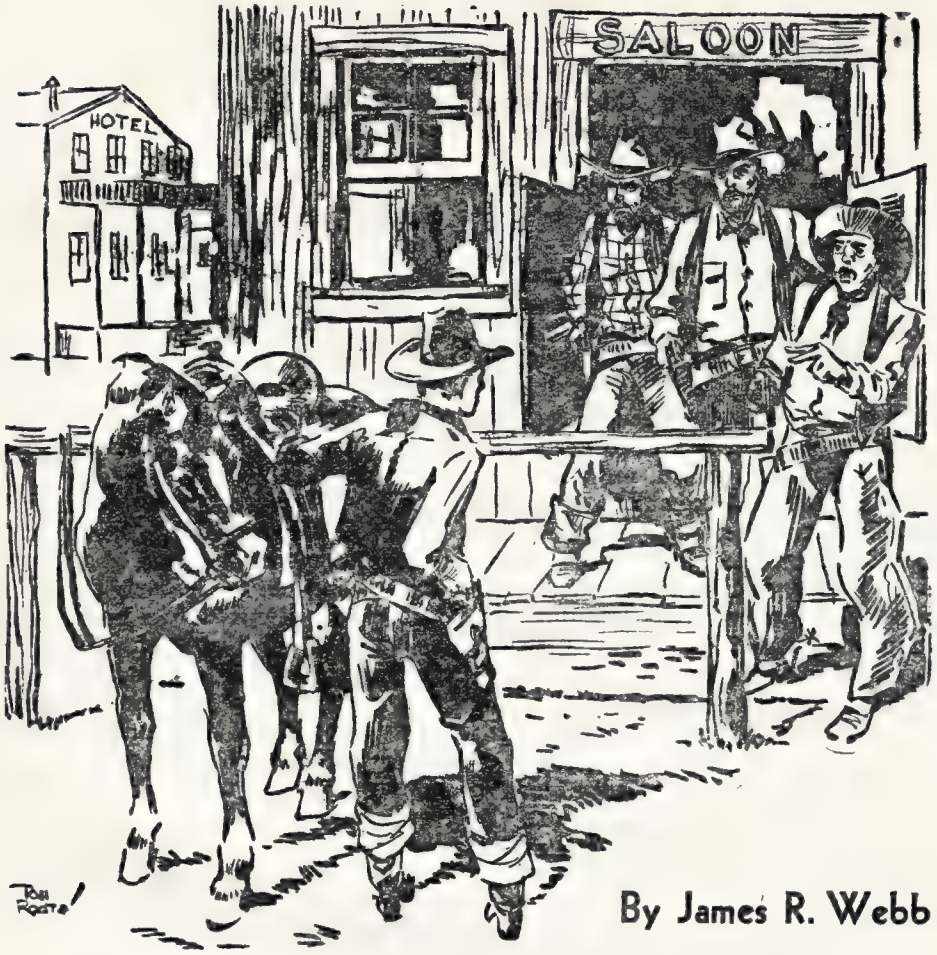


By James R. Webb

Johnny Jerome had spent his life trying to keep from being licked—but when he finally made up his mind to try to win, fireworks started to pop in Vinegarone.

GRIM, tight-lipped cowpokes and smooth-faced, heavy-paunched town folk watched without sympathy or compassion while a lean-faced, yellow-haired youngster took one of the most merciless beatings the bleak, windswept cowtown of Vinegarone had ever seen.

Retreating constantly as Bull Lassiter, ramrod of the Diamond Cross, forced him back through the crowd choking the dusty street, young John-

ny Jerome could do no more than protect his jaw with his right fist held high while he tried to jab the heavier Lassiter off-balance with his left. Every time that left flicked home, Bull Lassiter cursed and jolted Johnny's ribs with a bone-breaking tattoo that drained every ounce of color from the youngster's set face.

"Another minute o' this an' the Jerome brat will be walkin' on his heels for the rest of his no-'count life," a dusty-bearded prospector remarked. "He's gettin' his needin's for shore."

"Yeah," muttered Joe Morgan, of the Morgan Mercantile Company, shifting his tobacco quid placidly from one fat cheek to the other. "Mebbyso this'll learn him an' that stubborn maw o' his'n to pull stakes an' get the hell outa white men's country."

At the words, a tall, angular man with graying red hair flicked his expressionless blue eyes momentarily from the fight to glance at Morgan. Then he turned back to watch his ramrod's businesslike mauling of Johnny Jerome. This craggy, granite-faced man, with a look as bleak as any unpainted shack in Vinegarone, was Mark Blazer, owner of the huge, greedy Diamond Cross.

Lassiter's great fist smacked loudly against Johnny's gasping mouth. A trickle of blood mixed with the sweat on his chin. A left to the body doubled him up; another right to the face brought a tight groan from his battered lips. But still the youngster stood up. One eyebrow was so badly cut that blood completely blinded the eye. His arms moved automatically, obeying the instinctive commands of a brain long since battered into near-insensibility. Every time he lurched back against the crowd, some laughing spectator shoved him roughly forward to meet another of Lassiter's rocklike jolts.

LASSITER backed away for a moment, studying his man for the kill. He had long since wearied of the sport. Why wouldn't this fool kid go down and stay down? Lassiter's little eyes noticed that Johnny Jerome's right fist was not held as high as before. There was an opening for a looping smash there. He moved in, started the swing—and was met by a despairing counter-punch that snapped his bullet head back on his short neck. The kid's fists smacked in again and again before Bull could recover from his surprise.

"Just a flurry," the prospector decided. "That kid ain't got what it takes to lick a good man. You watch, Bull will knock his ears down now."

"Shore," Joe Morgan replied. "You can't go agin the laws o' nature. Bad stock breeds bad stock. The Jerome brat's paw got hung, an' the son's plumb born for hangin', you can see it standin' out all over him. Rotten spawn of a rotten—"

Morgan's words broke off in mid-air. The kid was down. Somebody's foot, intentionally or not, had tripped Johnny Jerome as he started to follow up his advantage. Before he could get a purchase in the dust, before his flailing arms and legs could lift him to a crouch—one of Lassiter's heavy boots crashed full into his bloody face. The boot swung back, forward again. Johnny's body twitched; he rolled over, face in the dust.

The fight was over. Bull Lassiter went back into the Shady Rest Saloon, followed by his boss, Mark Blazer. The prospector wandered down to Fain's Corral to look after his burros. Joe Morgan bit off another chew and returned to the cool dimness of his store. The rest of the crowd meandered here and there. Bull Lassiter had licked Johnny Jerome. They had expected it, and they were satisfied. Except that they would have liked it better had the kid been wearing a gun. Then Lassiter could have slapped a slug into Jerome's stomach and saved somebody the trouble of hanging him, sooner or later.

Young Johnny lay there in the sun-scorched street for perhaps fifteen

minutes. Dogs sniffed suspiciously at him and then padded on to more interesting discoveries. Bluebottle flies buzzed over him. Finally an old, wizened barfly named "Skeeter" Somers staggered out into the street and dragged the boy into the shade of the Morgan store building. Skeeter's ministrations were brief and to the point. He found a rusty pail somewhere, filled it with water, and sloshed it over Johnny's pale face. Then Skeeter drifted on; he couldn't stand the sunlight for long, it always brought the alcohol boiling up into his hazy brain.

THE water helped. From the shadowy peace of unconsciousness, the harsh, stinging pain of reality clutched at Johnny Jerome. He staggered to his knees, brought his fists up, the left outstretched, the right guarding his jaw. It was long seconds before his gray eyes cleared enough for him to realize that his opponent was no longer in front of him. He dropped his hands and came unsteadily to his feet.

He walked stiff-legged to the vacant lot behind the Elite Restaurant where he had tethered his wash-boardy old jughead. No one paid much attention to him as he jogged out of town. A couple of grimy-faced boys chivvied an ill-aimed rock or two after him as he passed the Shady Rest, but Johnny didn't even bother to turn his head.

It hardly seemed strange to him that he should get no sympathy for being forced into a fight by a man forty pounds heavier than he. He took no credit for standing up through five murderous minutes of pounding fists that would have made many a barroom brawler cry quits. He didn't curse his luck that some cowpuncher's boot had tripped him, nor did he find solace in the fact that it had taken an accident to knock him off his feet. All he knew was that he had been licked. He had been licked before. The memories of his twenty years of life stretched behind him as one long series of lickings.

Never had he known the sweet self-confidence that victory brings. Son of a man hanged for rustling, he had spent his childhood as the butt of every school-yard bully, and invariably he had been licked. He might have changed his luck by picking upon someone his own size, but that had never occurred to Johnny. His only fights had been the ones forced upon him.

IT was six miles to the ranch he and his mother had struggled with ever since Johnny could remember. He stopped only once on the way—at the cottonwood beside the narrow, winding road where his father, Lacey Jerome, had been hanged fifteen years before.

This grim old tree had become a sort of shrine with him. He had stopped under its gray-barked branches after almost every licking. When he was younger, he had sometimes cried while he nursed swollen features and blackened eyes beneath that high jutting limb where his fancy could still vision a dangling rope. Now he neither cried nor spoke. He just looked at the limb for a few moments, then clucked to his pony, and headed for the ranch.

His mother didn't meet him at the door of the sprawling, tumble-down 'dobe. He found her inside, sitting in a creaking old rawhide-bound rocker. Nancy Jerome had once been a pretty woman. Fifteen years of fighting the stigma of the lynch-tree and struggling against the solid weight of cow country prejudice had taken all beauty of feature from her. Now she was thin and gaunt, with no loveliness left except that which shone through the clear, direct blue of her sunken eyes.

She tried to rise from the chair at the sight of her son, but the effort was too much. She sank back, knuckles white against the chair arms.

"Johnny!" she gasped. "You've been in another fight!"

Johnny stooped and kissed her. " 'Tain't nothin', maw. I was walkin'

past the Shady Rest when Bull Lassiter began cussin' me. All them loafers laughed an' egged him on. Finally he said more'n I could stand, maw. I had to fight him."

Her eyes searched his battered face. "He kicked you when you were down. I can tell. Oh, Johnny, I know I was crazy to ever stay here! I might've known we could never make 'em admit they were wrong. But I wanted 'em to know I had a son who could make good where every man's hand was against him! It was my way of redeeming Lacey's name."

Johnny looked embarrassed. "We'll make it yet, maw. Shucks, they can't hold us down forever. Say, with the calf crop we got this year, we'll make a real spread outa the ol' LJ. Them buzzards will begin to take notice when we get a little dinero."

A brief shudder ran through the woman's thin body. Her eyes closed, then snapped open again. Johnny clasped her by the shoulders.

"Maw! Maw! What's the matter? You ailin'?"

Nancy Jerome looked at him a long moment before answering. "That calf crop—it isn't any more. Johnny, I—I stood up on Chavez Hill and watched 'em with your paw's old telescope. They ran the stock up into that old bottleneck draw above the spring and cut all the calves out. I heard the mothers bawling to high heaven. We're licked, son. I—I knew it when I watched 'em. I could feel it in my heart. I fainted up on that hill, Johnny."

YOUNG JOHNNY looked at an old gunbelt hanging from a set of buck horns above the fireplace. His mother had taken it from his father's body, after cutting it down from the cottonwood limb. Johnny had never worn it—on his mother's orders. Now he strode over and lifted it from the horns. He buckled it around his slender waist without taking his smoldering gaze from his mother's face.

"Who done it, maw?" he asked, his voice choked and unnatural.

She looked at him, brilliant blue eyes bright with pain. "Diamond Cross punchers," she replied slowly. "Same as always. Only they never were so brazen before. I guess Mark Blazer got tired of waiting."

Johnny's mind swung back over the harsh, back-breaking years. Every time the LJ had seemed headed for success, it had been dealt a body blow. Rustling can be a hard, almost impossible game on some ranges; but not when the victims are a woman and a half-grown boy. Not when public opinion backs the rustlers. "Ain't no harm in out-rustlin' the rustlers, is there? We're just gettin' back some o' the increase from the stock Lacey Jerome stole in the first place!" That cry soothed all consciences.

Though Johnny didn't realize it, so general was the spirit of persecution, at the root of the whole trouble lay one man: Mark Blazer. The cow country could be kind as well as cruel; after Lacey Jerome's hanging, sympathy might well have swung in favor of his widow and child. But Mark Blazer had made sure that it didn't. He had fanned the flame of persecution and kept it burning until it had become a fixed habit. People forgot now that Nancy Jerome and young Johnny were innocent victims of fate; they had come to consider them as guilty as the father. "Born to be hung" was the verdict.

"We been goin' at it the wrong way, maw," Johnny declared flatly. "We been tryin' to get respect by turnin' the other cheek. I been fightin' only because I had to. I never figgered on winnin', all I was aimin' to do was keep from gettin' licked. I'm thinkin' I'll try to do some winnin' for a change."

His mother's voice was weak from pain. "I know I've been wrong. I've been stubborn. I've made you suffer because I was too proud to leave this country. But it's not too late. We'll pull stakes and go where every man's hand isn't against us."

"Maw, you've got to tell me something. You've got to let me know why Mark Blazer's had it in for us so plumb pizenous."

NANCY JEROME looked in her son's face and saw again those calves being cut from their mothers. Mark Blazer had rustled those calves, not for gain, not to add to the great herds of the Diamond Cross. No, he had done it because he had once loved the girl who had married Lacey Jerome; because he couldn't stand defeat; because, after Lacey's disgrace and death, his widow was still too loyal to his memory to marry Mark Blazer. Blazer's love had chilled into hate, then; a hate that had broadened to include Nancy's son. Bitter, remorseless, that hate. A disease that had warped Mark Blazer, even while spurring him on to make the Diamond Cross the greatest, hungriest spread on the whole Vinegarone range.

"Johnny," she said, her voice gathering strength as it went along, "I've never told you about Mark Blazer for fear you'd try to kill him and get yourself shot down like a dog. That, and because I hoped his rotten meanness would cool down in time. Looks like it won't, so—I'll tell you now."

Johnny's jaw hardened as he listened; the muscles twitched along the clean, square line of it. His knuckles whitened as he came to realize that Blazer was responsible for the prejudice that had made his childhood a friendless hell, that Mark Blazer indirectly was responsible for every school yard licking he had taken. Mark Blazer's reason came as a complete surprise to him; his mother had never so much as hinted that any man but Lacey Jerome had ever loved her.

"Your paw may have been rustling," his mother concluded, "but I'll never believe it! I could never find out a thing. They took him out and hung him, Johnny! Before I even knew he was in trouble—he was dead!"

Johnny slipped the worn, shiny old .45 from the leather, stroked it with rope-scarred young fingers. That gun had lain beneath Lacey Jerome's suspended boot heels. For years Johnny had cleaned it periodically, kept it oiled; but never had it been fired.

Nancy Jerome watched his fingers with frightened eyes. "We have to leave here, Johnny. We'll sell out for anything we can get. You can't go gunning for Mark Blazer, honey. You can't shoot. You've never worn a gun. He'll kill you, or more likely Bull Lassiter will shoot you before you ever get to the ranch house."

Johnny stood up, bent and kissed his mother full on the pain-wracked lips. He didn't speak; he couldn't lie to her. Better that he keep his mouth shut. His head was up as he walked through the low doorway; the heavy gunbelt hung low on his narrow hips.

THE jughead's hard, jolting gait took him to Diamond Cross wire almost without his realizing it. There were things Nancy Jerome didn't know, Johnny reflected, just as there were things he hadn't known. She hadn't known, for instance, that the years of persecution, the continual jeers, the repeated lickings, had dimmed the youngster's faith in himself, his faith in his father. Because he had heard it so often, Johnny had come unconsciously to believe that he was born for failure, that it was mete and fitting that he be kicked around at every callow kid's prideful whim.

It had taken the knowledge of Mark Blazer's deliberate purpose to shake Johnny out of his hopeless acceptance of things as they were. For the first time in his life he was determined to carry the fight to the enemy, to go into a brawl with the will to win, not just to keep from getting licked. He realized there was a heap of difference between those two attitudes.

He didn't let his scanty fighting equipment worry him; though, he thought grimly, it was a whale of a lot more plentiful than his mother

realized. That was another thing she didn't know. He had never told her of the ancient six-gun he had found beside the body of the old-timer who had died of the drunken horrors up by Frenchman's Bluff. She didn't know of the pennies saved for cartridges, the long hours of practice on the open range.

He was no expert, he knew. He'd never had money enough for sufficient ammunition. But he hadn't needed shells to practice drawing and thumbing the hammer. If he could make the fastest draw, he'd trust to luck about hitting the mark.

The approach to the Diamond Cross buildings was by a long lane bordered by green alfalfa pasture land. The jughead's hoofbeats were almost inaudible on the rich, loamy earth. Sleek whiteface shippers flung their heavy heads up and watched him stolidly from the lush pasture. Johnny didn't see them; his eyes were fixed straight ahead.

TALL cottonwoods shaded the unpainted bunkhouse and tack shack, but Mark Blazer's big frame house stood apart, bleak, hot, unsheltered. There was no respect for comfort, no softness in that grim cowman, who rode as hard as any puncher, and spent his nights alone with his bitterness, downing his regular pint of redeye as a solemn rite.

Johnny saw no punchers idling by the bunkhouse door. Diamond Cross hands were never idle, seldom at the home spread in the daytime. But he half expected to find Bull Lassiter. The ramrod should be back from town by now.

He wasn't disappointed. The burly, slope-shouldered foreman was standing in the doorway of the 'dobe blacksmith shop. Johnny noted with deep satisfaction that Lassiter's lips were swollen, one eye bluish, half-closed.

Lassiter was a self-possessed, forceful man. He had to be, to run Mark Blazer's outfit. The humorless, broad-edged cruelty in him made him top wolf of a tough pack. His blunt fingers stuck a new-made quirly between his mangled lips, flicked a match into flame, while he watched Johnny Jerome pull up in front of the smithy. He was not a man to show surprise.

"What the hell are you doin' here, kid?" he asked, smoke eddying slowly from his broad nostrils. "Ain't you had enough?" He waved a hand briefly. "Vamoose, afore I finish the job."

Johnny swung slowly out of the saddle. His lips, more bruised than Lassiter's, were equally tight. His eyes as flat and expressionless. He indicated the gunbelt at his hips, careful not to bring his hand too near the darkened grips of the old gun.

"Reckon that's just what you got to do, Lassiter," he said, keeping his voice steady, fighting to keep down the instinctive fear this stocky, business-like man aroused in him. "I'm wearin' the tools."

Lassiter grinned briefly, tauntingly. "Tools," he repeated. "That's what gunslammers call 'em. You ain't no gunslammer, punk. Besides, you ain't wearin' but one of 'em."

Johnny Jerome realized the purpose of the taunting words. Bull Lassiter was trying to make him feel ridiculous, to break down his newly acquired confidence. Realizing it, he fought against it.

"Call it a gun," he replied tersely. "I come to use it, Lassiter."

INCREDULITY turned to determination in Lassiter's matter-of-fact mind. If this younker was determined to feel the burning agony of a bullet in his belly, Lassiter was ready and willing to oblige him. He stepped unhurriedly away from the 'dobe doorjam, flipped the cigarette away.

"You asked for it, punk," he clipped —and went for his gun.

Johnny had watched every move with a clarity only full awareness of his deadly peril could bring to his mind, his eyes. He saw Lassiter's right hand dart downward, and, amazingly, he felt the hammer of his own gun

coming back under the pressure of his thumb, felt his wrist twisting the butt for the draw. The gun blasted deafeningly without conscious pressure on the trigger. With paralyzing knowledge that he had fired too quickly, he fought the gun's roaring kick, wrestled the barrel downward for another shot.

Only then did he realize that he had heard no other explosion, felt no searing shock of a slug in his tense stomach. Choking white smoke wafted from in front of his staring eyes, and he saw, unbelievably, that Lassiter was down.

Hearsay had told him that an experienced gunfighter could always get a shot in before he died. Instinctively Johnny jumped aside, but barely had his boots jarred to the dirt before his eyes told him that Bull Lassiter would trigger no dying shots.

The ramrod was sprawled face downward, his right arm twisted under him, his draw uncompleted. A thin spiral of blue smoke twisted upward from the unfinished quirly, not a yard from his face. Johnny's bullet, fired too soon, before the tipped-up muzzle could be flipped level, had taken Lassiter square in the forehead. He had died before his body touched the ground.

Johnny Jerome felt no elation. It was too soon for that, and he knew he had only luck to thank for his life. He had drawn with unbelievable, dazzling speed . . . and shot too fast, a mistake that had killed many a man before him. His heart pounded furiously against his ribs as he holstered his gun and climbed into the saddle.

The jughead bucked and trembled. Johnny was thankful for the task of subduing him; it was a workaday experience that soothed his jangled nerves, helping to take his mind from a more dangerous job—facing Mark Blazer. Johnny had hoped that if he got by Bull Lassiter successfully it would give him confidence to meet a worse enemy, but he found that it hadn't worked that way; he was unnerved by his own lucky shot. He felt luck couldn't be pushed successfully twice.

But quick memory of his mother's stricken face, the defeat-laden years that had wrenched the fresh, lovely youth from her slowed the wild beating of his heart, restored the resolute set to his jaw. The hot, dry sunlight beat down on his back, baked the chill out of the narrow space between his shoulder blades, as, cowboy fashion, he rode the scant seventy-five yards to the gallery of the big, brooding house.

SENSES taut, alert, he slipped out of the kak, loosened the .45 in its holster. The warped, weathered steps drummed hollowly beneath his boots as he climbed to the porch. He caught a fleeting glimpse of the wide-eyed face of a fat Mexican cook staring at him from the corner of the house. His neck felt stiff, the palms of his hands moist.

The front door was open. Mark Blazer was standing in the opening, his big, red-brown hands hanging loosely at the seams of his faded Levis. His cold blue eyes stared at young Johnny unwinkingly. The compressed lips beneath the white-flecked red mustache curved downward at the corners; the nostrils of his prominent nose flared slightly, as though he were breathing hard.

Johnny Jerome came to a stop in front of him. He waited for Blazer to speak, positive that those chilly eyes had seen his encounter with Bull Lassiter. The feeling was strong in him that nothing escaped this rock-like man.

"I seen you kill Bull," Mark Blazer said bluntly. "You're twenty years old, an' you're ridin' gun-sign a'ready."

Johnny smiled bitterly. "You'll say I murdered Bull, I reckon. Claim to the sheriff I pulled a gun-sneak. Just born to be hung, huh? Well, I don't aim to have you sayin' that, Mark Blazer. I don't aim to leave you in talkin' shape when I ride away from here."

"*If* you ride away from here," Blazer corrected in his hoarse, cold voice. "That was a lucky shot, younker."

Johnny didn't want to put off the issue by talking. He had always heard this man spoken of with awe and respect. It was hard to cast aside the habits of years. He suddenly felt himself Mark Blazer's equal, his superior. He wanted to get it over with, while he still had a mite of confidence left that he could outshoot the fastest, most deadly man on Vinegarone range.

"My maw just told me," Johnny said, his voice as hard, as cold as the older man's. "I just now found out that you're the skunk what's been makin' folks hate us all these years. I just now learnt you're the man what's had me called rustler ev'ry time I tried to get back some o' my stock what *you* stole. She told me, Mark Blazer, that you used to be in love with her an' didn't have the guts to take your beatin' like a man!"

Mark Blazer's cold eyes grew colder. "So she told you, huh? An' she sent you gunnin' for me, huh?"

"She didn't do nothin' o' the kind!" Johnny flared. "She wanted to sell out after you ruined us this mornin'! I come to get them calves back without tellin' her nothin'. I come to kill you, Mark Blazer—like you killed my paw. An' it's strictly my own idea!"

GRUDGING admiration flickered in Blazer's eyes. "That's a helluva lot more'n what your paw woulda done! Your paw was like you been all your life—born to be licked! Even when he died, he died meek! Him with a wife an' nipper, an' he died meek! Hombres what die meek deserve what they get. Hangin's too good for 'em!"

Such grim, Spartan philosophy was more than Johnny Jerome could take from this man. His knees bent slightly; his arms hung stiff, fingers hooked.

"I ain't listenin' to no more o' that from the skunk what killed my paw!" Johnny blazed in a tight, choked voice. "Grab your hardware, Mark Blazer!"

Blazer's lips clamped shut, his right hand d r o p p e d. Johnny's fingers slapped cedar, thumb tipped hammer, wrist flicked to one side. A double roar thundered against his ears, and with that noise young Johnny felt a swift stab of pain jerk at his hand, run up his forearm with swift, electric suddenness.

He stared through a haze of smoke at Mark Blazer. Blazer was still standing by the doorway, face expressionless, a thin tendril of smoke streaming from the muzzle of his six-gun.

A few crimson drops of blood from his shattered arm gleamed redly up at Johnny from the curled boarding of the porch. A foot or two to one side lay his gun. Johnny could think of nothing but that gun. He had to have it. His left hand was still all right; he could still shoot. One wound couldn't stop him. Nothing could stop him while that man still stood. He wasn't merely trying to avoid a licking this time. He had provoked this fight. This time he was out to win.

With a quick tensing of his muscles, Johnny dove for that gun! His fingers were widespread, groping — when M a r k B l a z e r jumped forward slammed the barrel of his gun hard against Johnny's head!

A red sea boiled over him, overwhelmed him, but as the red merged into black, Johnny knew he had reached that gun, squeezed the trigger.

HE opened his eyes, lying on a hard wooden bench in the front room of Mark Blazer's house. Instinctively his left arm shot out, his bloody right fist came up to guard his jaw. His reflexes were still those of a boxer, not a gun-fighter.

Feeling foolish, he caught himself, jerked to a sitting position on the bench. Mark Blazer was sitting across from him, a .45 and a whisky flask

beside him on a small table. Johnny swung his eyes away. So that last shot had missed, too! Licked again! Something like a sob choked his throat.

Mark Blazer seemed to read his thoughts. "Figger you've took another lickin', don't you, younker?"

Johnny didn't say anything. He couldn't.

Mark Blazer took a pull from the whisky flask, hunched forward in his chair. His mouth was grim as ever, but something had happened to his eyes. The chilly light was gone.

"Your last shot missed, kid. You was unconscious afore you ever triggered it. Slug slammed through the side o' my house. Yeah, I reckon you figger you lost that fight."

Johnny looked down at his arm. It smelled of whisky. Mark Blazer had treated it with the only antiseptic he knew, and bound it with a clean rag.

"But you didn't take no lickin' in that fight," Mark Blazer went on. "*I did.* Lord knows I hate to admit it, but you whipped me cold, Johnny Jerome. You did what your paw never did. He was handsome, an' he took Nancy away from me, but I still knew I was the best man. An'—likely you won't b'lieve it—your paw was rustlin' when he was caught an' lynched—only I wasn't there. They told me about that, Johnny Jerome. He didn't put up no fight when he was collared, he didn't remember he had a wife to fight for. He just plumb let hisself get hung without never goin' for his gun!"

Mark Blazer's voice was hoarse. He took another drink in the vain hope that the liquor would freshen it.

"When I realized your maw had turned me down for a gent like that, I just plumb went loco. I figgered to beat it into her head that she'd made the wrong play. An' when I seen you growin' up like your paw—takin' your lickin's an' seemin' to feel you had 'em comin' to you—I come to hate you like I'd hated Lacey Jerome. I kept gettin' madder an' madder at the way your maw had wasted her life—she'd o' had a real son if she'd married me!"

JOHNNY was looking at him now, and Blazer's words were beginning to sink in. He knew he was hearing what no man had heard before, that he was looking into the tortured soul of this strange, bitter man.

"But I know now how plumb wrong I was, Johnny Jerome. You made me see it. I wasn't sure of it when you killed Bull Lassiter with a lucky shot. I wasn't sure of it until you triggered that last shot at me after I'd winged you an' then buffaloed you with a gun-barrel. You've got what it takes, Johnny. There ain't no givin' up about you. You're in there to win, right up to the finish. You're like the son I'd have liked to of had!"

In there to win, right up to the finish! Those words sent a thrill through Johnny Jerome that wiped out in one short second the memory of those countless lickings.

"It comes hard to admit it, Johnny, but I know now your maw has so much good stuff in her that it overflowed into her son, no matter what his paw was like. I've been mean, an' what's worse—I've been the blamedest fool this side o' hell! You proved to me I couldn't lick your maw!"

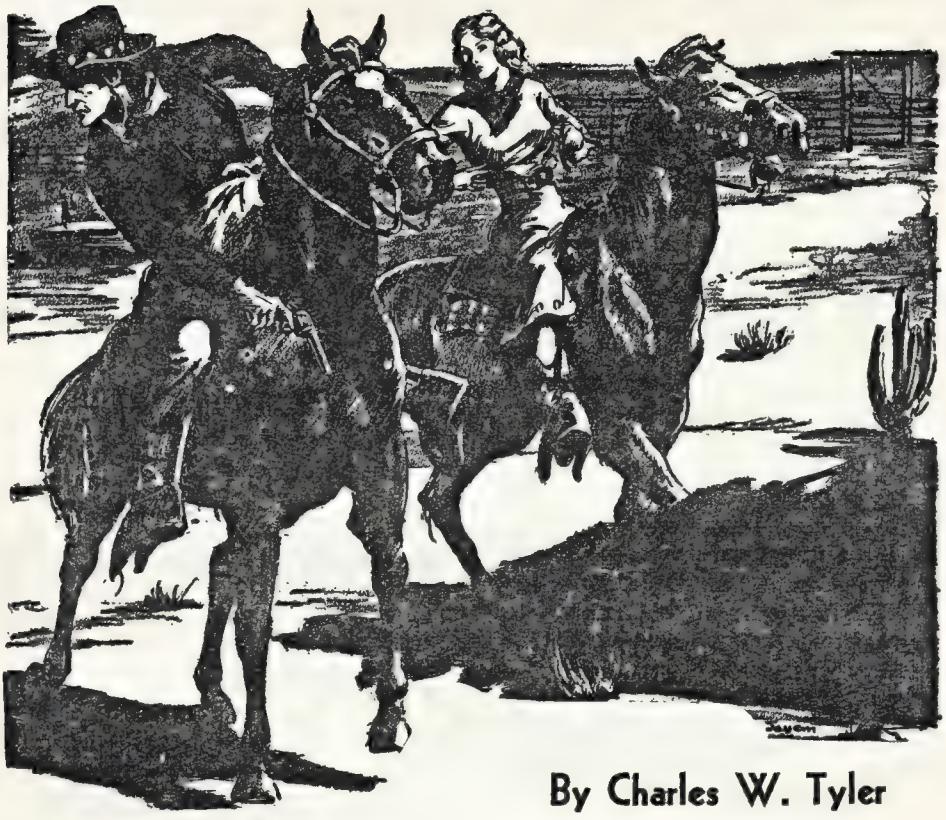
Young Johnny stood up. Mark Blazer handed him his old gun, butt foremost.

"You get them calves back, Johnny," Blazer said, looking straight into his eyes. "I wish I could wipe out these last fifteen years, only I know I can't. But I'm tellin' you straight—things is gonna be diff'rent on this range! I'm hangin' somethin', Johnny Jerome, only it ain't you. I'm hangin' up my gun!"

Johnny walked down the steps, where the wash-boardy old jughead was waiting. For the first time in his life, he felt the thrill of victory, and he knew what he was going to do—hang up his gun, too.

When gun-hungry hombres pledge themselves to badland bondage, they sign their names in blood on a . . . .

Powdersmoke Payroll



By Charles W. Tyler

TOM ALLISON was a handsome, reckless fellow. But his good looks were partly offset by the sultry wariness windowed in his eyes. In the years of his upbringing, cunning, vicious traits broke surface at intervals, like some ugly, recurring fever.

The things that Tom wanted—he took.

He wanted "Jan" Madison.

It was of no particular importance to Tom that the girl was engaged to Mike. As a youngster, he had always appropriated the belongings of his older brother, when it so pleased him. And, because he was the "kid," he usually got away with it. It seemed that he might now.

Tom had been away from Sun Prairie for five years. He was a drifter. He had punched cattle on the border for a time; had ridden for a horse outfit, but it was easier money that he was looking for, and it was not hard to get, he discovered, if one was not too greatly burdened with scruples.

Mike had been made a deputy sheriff a short time before Tom came back

to Sun Prairie. Mike had a homely, weathered face; a lean, work-toughened body. Two things he was proud of. One was the shiny, ball-pointed star he wore; the other was Jan, old Bob Madison's girl, out at the Lazy M.

Mike had saved his money, and had bought an interest in the Bar 6 spread. He was a plodding sort of fellow, gifted more with character and stability than flashy traits. People liked him.

"Lawman, eh?" Tom had said on the occasion of their first meeting. His smile was thin-lipped, hard. He spoke with sneering disdain.

"Why, I sorta work at it a little," Mike had admitted. "Reckon I'm too new to be much use. Mostly I serve papers an' look for stolen stock, an' fool around. There ain't much else to do in Sun Prairie. Guess that's why old Matt Cressy sent me here. I dunno how I'd act if I had to stand up an' fog it out with some tough hombres."

"No, you never was much of a fighter," Tom said. "Yuh used to let the smaller kids shove yuh around." He grinned crookedly.

"Say," Mike said, liking to turn the channel of the conversation. "Yuh remember Jan Madison, don't yuh?"

"Who, that spindle-shanked brat with pigtails—the youngest one?"

"That's the one." Mike chuckled. "Wait until yuh see her. She growed up into the prettiest girl yuh ever saw, Tom. I—we're sorta fixin' to get married one of these days."

"Married!" jeered Tom. "What yuh wanta get married for? Go with one a spell, an' then get another. Yuh oughta seen the spick *muchacha* I had in Sonoyta."

TOM met Jan at the Saturday night dance at the school house on Barton Flat. His eyes widened when Mike said, "Jan, you remember Tom, don't yuh?"

The girl was sweet and fresh and lovely—the sort that men like Tom Allison always find exciting.

Mike had to leave early. Sometimes things got a little lively in Sun Prairie late Saturday night and Mike lent aid to old Tim Stark, the marshal, when it was needed. Tom was prompt in offering to see that Jan got home all right.

The girl found Tom to be pleasant company. He had wit and a ready tongue, and his talk was of distant cities and towns—distant to Jan, for she had scarcely been away from Sun Prairie in all of her life.

At the Madison ranch, Tom boldly claimed a good night kiss, as the privilege of Mike's brother. The girl's veins ran with fire. Afterward she felt guilty, but there was a thrill in the swift love-making of Tom Allison.

They saw each other frequently after that, and it wasn't long before people were saying that Tom was like to steal away Mike's girl. The young deputy was the last to hear the gossip that was going around.

When at last he spoke to Tom, the other laughed, a brittle, mirthless laugh.

"All right, what yuh goin' to do about it, Mike?" he flung out in challenge.

Mike was stunned. At last he managed to say, "Is Jan in love with yuh, Tom?"

"Sure! What the hell d'yuh think?"

"You're goin' to marry her then, Tom?" Mike said, fighting the agony in his heart.

"I reckon," Tom answered carelessly.

Mike's eyes bored into him. "Yuh ain't goin' to drift when yuh get tired of her?"

"Aw, mind yore own business!"

Jake Wort was a card dealer in Big Ed's place. One day he spoke to Mike in a soft aside.

"Say, listen here, Mike! I wanta give yuh a piece of advice. Keep that brother of yours out of Ed's. He's so crooked the only place he could sleep

comfortable would be with a mess of snakes. He's too slick with his hands. I never saw a feller that could deal 'em from so many parts of a deck. He rung in everythin' last night but a sleeve holdout. Somebody's goin' to gun him down one of these times. Mark what I tell yuh."

"Don't you do it," Mike warned, with a steely flash of his usually placid eyes. "But much obliged anyhow, Jake."

That night Mike rode out to the Madison ranch. He was troubled, and nothing that had ever happened to him had hurt like the knowledge that Jan no longer cared for him. He wanted to be sure about that.

TOM and the girl were sitting in the shadows on the porch. Their voices hushed as he rode up and dismounted. Jan came to meet him.

"Hullo, Mike," she said. "It's sure good to see you again. Where have you been keeping yourself?"

"Howdy, Jan." Mike's voice was hoarse. The very sight of her started his heart pounding.

"Tom's here."

"Yeah, I know."

They talked for a little, finding conversation awkward.

"Say, Jan!" Mike said at last. "I want to ask yuh somethin'. Are yuh in love with Tom?"

The girl gasped. "Why, I—I don't know. Perhaps I am."

Tom came then. "Nice friendly little call, hey?" he cried. "Checkin' up on us, eh? All right—I'll give it to yuh. We *are* in love. We're goin' to get married."

"Yuh better be thinkin' of hookin' on some place then," Mike said. "They can use a hand over to the Bar 6."

"I don't want their damn' job!" snarled the other. "I got plenty money."

"Not that kind of money, Tom. It's no good."

"What do yuh know about my kind of money, yuh damn law sneak?"

"Enough. I want to talk to yuh a minute. Tonight is as good as any time. Come down by the corral."

When they were alone, Tom flung out, "All right, git it out of yore craw! What's up?"

"Jan is a heap too good for either of us," Mike said. "I love her, an' I want to see her happy, an' if she's in love with you—well, that's how it's got to be. Reckon I can take it, but it's goin' to hurt like hell. But, I tell yuh, young feller, I ain't goin' to set back an' see her marry a cheap gambler, an' a crooked one at that."

"Yuh ain't talkin' to me."

"I sure am. I been hearin' things in town, an' they ain't nothin' Jan would want to know about. The name Allison always stood for square-shootin'."

"Yuh talk like a stinkin' preacher."

"Reckon just talkin' ain't goin' to do any good."

"What yuh aim to try then?"

"Knockin' some of the hell out of yuh, mebbe."

"Yeah! Yo're pretty brave—wearin' a badge an' slinkin' behind it."

"This here star don't count none now, Tom. These things is just between you an' me, an' by gosh, I'll make a man out of yuh or know why."

"You nor no man can talk to me thataway!" Tom gritted. He threw his fist lightning fast at Mike's face.

Mike took the blow on the mouth, and his bloodied lips pinched tight. They fought savagely, silently, with only the sound of blows in the night. Jan ran from the house. Tom was on his knees, dazed from a smash to the jaw. The girl threw her arms around him.

"You brute!" she cried at Mike. "A fine big brother you are. You're a bullying beast and a jealous fool! I hate you! I hate you, I tell you. I never want to see you again. Never!"

"I'm right sorry things turned out like this," Mike said thickly. "But I

care for yuh too much, Jan, just to stand back an' see your life ruined."

Tom was on his feet now. "I'll kill yuh for this, Mike!" he panted.

MIKE turned and went to his horse. Grim thoughts hammered at his brain as he rode back to town. Jan and Tom both despised him. He doubted that he could influence his brother. Tom had always been wilful, headstrong. So far he had only muddied a situation that called for greater wisdom than he possessed.

As he rode toward the livery barn in Sun Prairie, old Tim Stark called to him. When he had stabled his horse, Mike joined the marshal on the piazza of the house a few doors down the street.

"I wish I knew what to do about Tom," Mike said, as he rolled a cigarette. And he told old Tim of the things that troubled him.

"Yeah, I know," grumbled the marshal. "I had my eye on him. Runs with a bad crowd, Mike. There's Dutch Wall an' Luke Igo an' Pete Hernandez. Wall used to be a member of the Pike gang. Igo is a gunman. Jack Ray messed in rustlin' a spell, an' Hernandez is one of them ha'f-an'-ha'fs that would as lief run a knife up yore middle as eat frijoles."

Number Eight, with its heavy train of mail, express and Pullmans, pulled in from the west and stopped to take water at the tank near the depot, as was its nightly custom.

Suddenly there was the sound of a shot from the direction of the Webfoot Saloon. Tim Stark, cursing his rheumatism, lurched to his feet and started across the street. Mike was at his side.

"I been lookin' fer it!" the marshal said. "I saw Hernandez an' Igo buckin' the faro layout a little while ago, an' talkin' big."

"Thank gosh Tom is out at Madison's," Mike said. "I been afraid he was goin' to be mixed up in a shootin' scrape."

Men were spilling from the door of the saloon. Mike was ahead of the marshal now, fighting to get inside. A sickly street lamp revealed Pete Hernandez plunging from an alley that led to the back.

"Here, where the hell yuh goin' in such a rush?" Tim Stark lunged for the swarthy one.

A knife glinted in the thin light and the blade hit the marshal in the arm before he could clear his gun. Luke Igo and Dutch Wall were following Hernandez. The former struck at old Tim with a pistol barrel. Then, before Mike could get into action, the three disappeared in the dark, going toward the feed yard, but when they were there, they swung in the direction of the depot.

In the Webfoot Saloon it was revealed that a lookout had been shot in the shoulder. The faro dealer said that Dutch Wall was coppered in the "Big Square," when he suddenly drew his gun and fired, with no apparent cause, other than evident rage because of his losses.

Mike Allison went to the office of old Doc Holliday with the marshal, who was bleeding badly.

"All I want is jist one whack at that Hernandez!" growled Tim Stark. "I shore woulda blowed out his light, but he slashed me in my gun arm, an' then Igo rapped me with his six-iron. Where'd they go, Mike?"

"Some said toward the livery stable," the deputy answered, "but the barn man says they didn't get their hosses. Likely they got mounts at one of the hitchracks."

An hour had passed. Doc Holliday had finished with the marshal's wound and was probing for the bullet in the lookout's shoulder. Mike Allison had been making the rounds of the town and was returning toward the doctor's tipsy gate. Suddenly there was a yell from the direction of the railroad station.

THE light that streamed from the open door of the telegraph office revealed the night operator, eyeshade awry, waving his arms. Mike started toward him on the run.

"What's the matter?"

"Train robbers just stood up Number Eight at Little Dead Man's Sidin', twenty miles east of here, Mike! The engine an' two-three cars up ahead are off the iron!"

Tim Stark grunted through Doc Holliday's gate, cursing.

"That's Dutch Wall's crowd, the damn blackguards! My gosh, an' I had good cause to kill 'em."

"They couldn't get to Little Dead Man as quick as this," Mike said. At the same instant a dread premonition assailed him. The scene of the holdup was only ten miles from the Madison ranch. He was thinking of Tom, needing money, but he banished the thought.

"Flagman went back to Deep Springs an' woke up the day man," the Sun Prairie operator was saying. "He says there was a lot of shootin' an' he thinks some of the crew were killed."

"Telegraph Matt Cressy, the sher'f at Loveland," Mike directed. "Tell him I'll pick up some punchers at the Bar 6 an' at Madison's an' meet him at Little Dead Man."

He then hurried toward the livery barn and dragged the stableman from his cubby-hole of an office and ordered his horse saddled. He took a lantern and looked through the stalls and corrals, but he did not see the blue roan that Tom had ridden to the Madison ranch that evening.

Mike got a carbine and extra cartridges from his office, and a few minutes later was galloping out of town. He stopped at the Bar 6, on his way to the Madison ranch, and soon a half dozen punchers were saddling for the start to the scene of the holdup.

A half an hour's hard riding brought him to Madison's. Lanterns danced, men dragged gear from the racks, anxious to be off.

Jan came at last from the house, and saw Mike talking with her father.

"Dad! Mike! What's the matter?"

"Bandits ditched the Eastern Mail out north here," Mike said. "Number Eight."

Old Bob went toward the corral where riders were cursing and roping mounts. The girl caught Mike's arm. Her fingers bit hard.

"Have you seen Tom?"

Mike shook his head.

"He left here a little while after you did. He must have got back to Sun Prairie before you left!" Her voice raised in pitch.

"I looked for the blue roan," Mike said thickly. "It wa'n't at the barn. The stableman said he hadn't seen him since he left." There was a grim note in the deputy's voice.

"Mike!" There was a husky note creeping in. "Mike, you don't think—! You—you—! Why don't you say something?"

"Likely I missed him when I turned off to the Bar 6," Mike said. He patted the girl's hand. "Or, mebbe, he took the cut-off over the bench where the old line shack is."

"But I tell you, he had time to reach town. Something has happened!" The girl's fingers tightened on Mike's arm. Her bosom lifted to the surge of an inward tempest. Sobs choked her. "You hate me! You do, don't you, Mike? You hate Tom!"

Mike shook his head. "I never could hate yuh, Jan. An' Tom's my brother. I wa'n't punchin' him 'cause I hated him tonight, not no more than dad did when he used to lick him for somethin' he'd done."

WHEN the deputy went to join the Madison riders, Jan was crying, for a vague terror had laid hold of her, the small-flaming wick of woman's intuition lighting the way for frightful thoughts.

It was coming light when Mike and the Lazy M cowboys reached Little Dead Man. Matt Cressy, the

gray, gnarled sheriff, was there with the Bar 6 punchers.

"Them hombres shore made a job of it," the sheriff said, indicating the derailed locomotive, express and mail car. "The engineer says they hit an open switch. He saw the light on it was red and could have stopped, but he didn't have any brakes back of the engine. Seems somebody turned an angle cock on the brake line—a tramp, mebbe."

Mike's lids narrowed thoughtfully.

"We'll cut fer sign," old Matt said, "now it's light enough. Them fellers are leavin' a hot trail. We ought to slide the groove."

It was in a barranca that the sheriff and Mike found where horses had been tethered. From here they backtracked the approach, which for a time was partly fouled. However, there came a point where the two sets of tracks separated.

Mike was an expert at trailing. He squatted beside first one set of hoof marks and then another. "Four hosses," he said at last.

The sheriff nodded.

"But," Mike went on, pointing toward the tracks approaching from the south, "three of them hosses comin' down in here was led an' there wa'n't no riders on 'em. Ridden broncs make deeper impressions with the front of the hoof, like this one here. See, them others—the heel an' toe marks are about equal depth."

The sheriff grunted. "That's right. Yuh figger three of them hombres was already here, Mike?"

"That—or they was on the train. Yuh spoke of a turned angle cock."

Mike then told of the things that had happened in Sun Prairie—the knifing of the marshal; the gunshot, and the escape of Dutch Wall, Luke Igo and Pete Hernandez.

"Number Eight was standin' at the depot," Mike concluded. "Mebbe they got on it, figgerin' they had built 'em a good alibi, an' at the same time havin' plenty excuse to dust mighty sudden."

"Brainy piece of work," the sheriff admitted. "Dutch Wall learned plenty smart tricks with the Pike gang, I reckon. Figger likely we kin expect a lot more of the same 'fore we come up with 'em."

"Mind if I do a little back-trailin'?" Mike asked, jerking his head at the tracks approaching Little Dead Man.

Matt Cressy suddenly looked at him sharply. "Sorta home range fer you, ain't it, Mike?"

"Yeah. Cruised it all when I was a kid."

"Better take one or two of the boys with yuh," the sheriff said. "Kain't never tell what yuh might run into."

"Reckon I'd rather go alone," said Mike.

"All right. I'll bring up the boys an' we'll light a shuck down the get-away trail." Old Matt hesitated just an instant, shrewd but kindly eyes on Mike Allison's troubled face; then he raised his hand. *"Salud!"*

Mike neck-reined south and his animal fell into a lope.

AN hour later he came to a tumble-down line shack in a draw. There was, too, a dilapidated shed and an old pole corral. The trail he had followed ended at the bars of the corral, which contained evidence that horses had occupied it but a short time before.

Mike swung a circle around the line shack. He came at last on the tracks of a single horse. These showed shoe plates on all four feet. To Mike this indicated a livery stable animal. Ranch horses of that range were shod only in front, as were the animals ridden by the bandits.

There was a place where bootmarks led toward the shack in the draw. Mike followed the hoofprints, and came at last on the blue roan, reins looped around the saddlehorn.

Tragic thoughts slugged him. No doubt in his mind now but that Tom was the rider who had led the three horses to Little Dead Man. One mistake his brother had made, Mike re-

flected. He had not considered the possibility of manhunters back-trailing.

So intent was Mike on the things that were beating through his brain that he did not immediately see the rider coming down the slope from the ridge. His horse up-pointed its ears and whinnied. He saw her then. It was Jan.

"What are yuh doin' here?" Mike demanded.

"I was following the tracks of the blue roan," the girl said. Her lips quivered a little. "It was an easy trail, with four irons on. It left the road to Sun Prairie at the fork." She stopped, her eyes staring hard at Mike. "What have you found?"

"A trail from the line shack to Little Dead Man," Mike answered her.

"The posse—?"

"They're on the get-away trail."

"Do—do you think they will come up with—with the train robbers?"

Mike shook his head slowly. "No. Matt Cressy an' the others won't ever find 'em."

"What do you mean?" the girl cried. "How can you be so sure?" Was it hope that burned in her eyes, Mike wondered.

"Nobody can find 'em," he repeated. He stopped and shook his head slowly, wearily. "Nobody—only me."

"You?"

Mike nodded, his eyes loaded with misery.

"When Tom an' me were kids," he said at last, "him ten, mebbe, an' me around fourteen, we found a cave over in the cedar breaks—just happened to stumble on it 'cause a cow shoved way back in the brush to have her calf. It was a big cave with an openin' back under a ledge big enough for hosses.

"We went there a lot, an' used to call it Robbers' Den, an' played at bein' train robbers, escapin' from the sher'f. We figgered how we could reach it without leavin' tracks for a posse to follow. There was half a dozen places where riders could break trail, if they knowed the country."

THE girl stared at him. Her eyes were misty. At last, she said: "And now you are both grown up—and you are playin' robbers an' lawmen again." She choked. "What are you goin' to do, Mike?"

"I can unpin this here star," Mike said through tight lips, "an' throw it to hell. I can head back to Sun Prairie—an' pack up. That, or I can go an'—an' get Tom an' the others."

"Mike!" He could hardly hear the words. "Mike, there isn't any fork in the trail for you!" She was looking straight into his eyes now. "You are sworn to uphold the law. It's your duty to—to take the posse to the cave."

"I'm goin' alone," Mike said.

"Alone? They'll kill you!"

"But can't yuh see, Jan? That's how it's got to be. I won't be cheatin' the law, an' mebbe Tom will have a chance to get away. Anyhow, yuh know it's kind of like when a feller gets a tannin'. It ain't so bad—when it's yuh own flesh an' blood—to do it yourself as to see somebody else a-doin' it. Yuh see how 'tis?"

Jan reined her horse close to him. "I can see a lot of things now," she said. "Kiss me! Quick! And go—"

Mike rode slowly. The sun was deep in its westing arc when he reached the cedar breaks. He dismounted and watered his horse at a spring, and waited there for darkness.

Blue night closed over the range and the stars sprinkled it with glittering jewels. The moon crowned the eastern rims with its golden crescent. Mike rode on. He left his horse at last in a box canyon and climbed over a ridge to where a cow trail picked its way down a steep slope in a series of switchbacks.

He came to thick chaparral and a gully, and here paused to listen,

straining his ears for sounds, there behind a close-woven curtain of brush.

He went forward, crawling on hands and knees. Once or twice in soft earth his fingers found the imprint of hoofs. Once a twig snapped and the sound was startlingly loud in the desert silence.

Mike reached the cave entrance, and the heavy smells that came from it were perfumed with wood smoke. He could hear the low murmur of voices. He loosened the safety strap of his holster and eased the Colt in its leather scabbard. He waited a long time, thinking how the yapping tongues of Sun Prairie would feast on his brother's disgrace.

"Jan Madison," they would say. "Her lover was an outlaw. He never was any good, that Tom Allison."

IT seemed that the train robbers had stationed no lookout. Apparently they felt secure here. Mike straightened slowly and eased ahead. He lifted his .45 from its holster. The floor of the passage was smooth and hard. He came to a turn and beyond caught the glimmer of yellow light. A few feet, and he would be able to see the big room, and the men who were there.

He thumbed the long hammer-piece of his Colt nervously. It was going to be his baptism of fire. He'd never thrown down on a man before. It wouldn't have been so terrible—only Tom was there. Tom under the flaming muzzle of a law gun.

Mike remembered the night his mother had died. She had said: "Look out fer Tom—Mike. He'll be needin' a steadyin' hand." And her eyes had searched his face so earnestly when she could no longer speak.

A pebble rolled under Mike's high-heeled boot. It made a noise. The voices beyond were suddenly hushed. Somebody said, "What's that?"

"Prob'ly a damn pack rat," a voice answered.

Mike waited, stiff, tense-nerved. A projecting rock hid from his eyes the lifting of a grotesque shadow against the inner wall, a shadow that slid along the stone face.

The deputy moved forward slowly, as the murmur of voices began again. Another step or two and he would be able to look into the main portion of the cave. He eased the hammer of his gun back. Maybe he'd have time to throw two shots before the lead of their six-shooters sledged him to the ground. Maybe not.

He crouched a little, eyes bright with the fever that was in him as he inched forward. Suddenly he sucked in a deep breath and lurched ahead, spraddle-legged. He saw vague shapes beyond the small flickering flame of a fire. He had a glimpse of the wolf-eyed Igo.

Mike fired. His aim, however, was disturbed by the unexpected lunge of a figure from behind a jutting pillar of rock. The bullet was thrown wild, as the deputy sought to dodge an assailant that smashed at his head with a pistol barrel. The blow of the heavy Colt hit his right forearm a numbing blow, and Mike's weapon spilled from his fingers.

He hit out with his left in a desperately flung hook, but the outlaw eluded the blow and closed with him. They fought and wrestled in a tight-locked clinch until another of the gang rushed forward and blue iron thudded twice on Mike's head.

WHEN Mike Allison opened his eyes, he gradually made out hard, leering faces, tinted by firelight. He identified Pete Hernandez first, and then Dutch Wall, and Luke Igo. He saw Tom, but the splitting ache of his head shuttered his eyes for a time.

He looked again. Tom was sitting on his heels against the wall. He was silent, staring hard into the fire. The others were talking. Once they passed a bottle around. Tom refused to drink. Strange how boyish his face seemed.

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Mike wondered if the kid was remembering those other visits to the cave long ago. There seemed to be a strange repose on Tom's face. Once he glanced toward the spot where Mike lay, and his eyes went back to scenes in the small yellow tongues of flame.

"How in hell did the damn lawman find the place?" Igo snarled.

Dutch Wall glanced at Hernandez. "Did yuh look around good out there? Yuh sure there ain't nobody else?"

"I tell you eet ees no," rasped the swarthy man. "He ees alone."

Mike's arms were cramped and he tried to move them, and discovered that his wrists were lashed behind him. He tried his legs experimentally and found them free.

"He's comin' round." It was the grating voice of Dutch Wall. "Good thing. I want him to know when we slip 'im that slug, curse his soul."

Mike struggled to a sitting posture. Hernandez, he saw now, was toying with a knife.

"Meester Alleson," the Mexican said softly. "Beeg, brave *jerife.*" He made a significant gesture toward the deputy with the blade.

"I thought yuh might have forgotten," Tom said quietly. "It seemed like a long time ago that you an' me come here, Mike." There was a strange quality in his voice. It wasn't harsh, sneering now.

"Reckon I wouldn't thought much about it," Mike said, "but I backtracked to the line shack an' found the blue roan."

"Who come with yuh?"

"Nobody. Matt Cressy an' the rest, they followed the get-away trail."

"Anybody know yuh come here?" Tom demanded. "Somebody must. Don't lie."

"Jan knows," Mike said.

"Jan!" The name seemed wrung from Tom's lips in pain.

Mike nodded wearily. "I met her at the line shack. She trailed the roan from the ranch."

(*Continued on page* 106)

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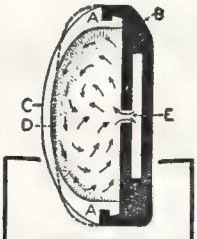

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(Continued from page 104)

"So she knows about me?" Tom mused. "She knows yuh come here?"

"She savvies that I headed for a place I spoke of as the Robbers' Den," Mike told his brother. "She don't know where it is. Or nobody else."

Luke Igo laughed long and loud. "Yuh oughta die!" he declared when his mirth had subsided. "Yuh shore are one damn fool." He looked at Dutch Wall. "Ain't that a nice piece of news? Now we can do like we figgered in the first place—stay here until them lawmen get sick of huntin' us; then divide the loot an' git, every hombre fer himself."

"Too bad yuh come," Tom said. "Reckon we got to leave yuh here."

"That's all right," Mike said. "It don't matter about me. Guess I'd got gunned down 'fore long anyhow. I'd never make much of a lawman."

"Yeah!" Tom grunted harshly. "Yuh ain't changed. Yuh wa'n't fast with yuh dukes. The smaller kids used to punch yuh plenty—trouble with you was yuh never could get it through yuh damn thick head that yuh was licked."

"I'm sorry for you an' Jan," Mike went on. "I'm sorry it all had to end like this, kid."

DUTCH WALL blasted an oath. "Aw, shet up! That sorta mush makes me sick. Gi'me another drink, Igo!"

Tom built a brown-paper cigarette, shaped it slowly, methodically, stood it up by its twisted end and stared at it. Then he set it in his lips and bent forward for a burning stick. He lit the cigarette, inhaled deeply and through the cloud of expelled smoke, slanted a glance at Pete Hernandez, his swarthy fingers gently sliding along the keen knife edge.

Mike's six-shooter still lay where it had fallen. Tom's eye found it. The .45 was, perhaps, five or six feet away from Mike.

Tom got to his feet and moved

(Continued on page 108)

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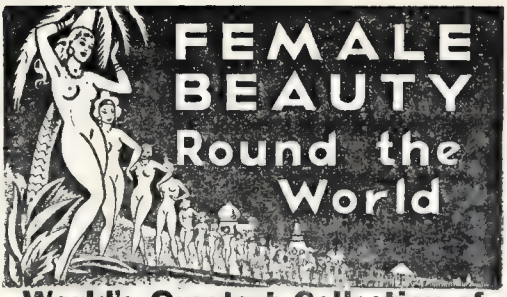

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(Continued from page 106)

around the fire. The glittering eyes of Dutch Wall followed him. Mike was watching him, too, for he had detected a hint of that wild recklessness on his brother's face that was characteristic of him, so like the defiant kid of those dim yesterdays, always ready to accept some boyish dare.

It happened then in a flash. Tom was close to Pete Hernandez. He stooped and his long, slim fingers—those deft-dealing gambler's fingers—snapped like a steel trap over the blade in the swarthy man's hand.

Blood spilled from that tight grip, as Tom wrenched the knife free. Fast then as a panther's spring, Tom Allison leaped toward Mike. He reversed the red-dripping blade, caught the haft and hit at the lashings that circled Mike's wrists.

In the same movement, Tom made a cross-draw with his left hand, snatching his six-shooter from its holster and thrusting it at Mike.

"All right, yuh ranahan—let's go!" The words were like the crack of a lash.

It was the same old devil-may-care spirit that had so many times got Tom into serious difficulty.

Mike caught at the Colt, a wild exultation firing him. He had never in his life so wanted to fight to the last stubborn breath in him. For an instant he fumbled at the grip with half-numb fingers; then his hand closed tight over the walnut stocks. His thumb dogged the hammer back—and let it go.

THERE was no trigger on the gun. That was like Tom, too. It wouldn't have been his way to pack any but a six-shooter with blue-lightning action.

It was strange, the still plodding, methodical manner in which Mike Allison's mind worked. He built upward from sound fundamentals.

The first bullet he sent into the

(Continued on page 110)

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"Checked oil pumping." J. W. McG., Pa.
"Have been using Ovrhaul for the past nine thousand miles and find it to do everything you said." M. H., New York
"Ovrhaul that I installed has done wonders to the cars and the people praise your product." B. G. A., Pa.
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"New Rings unnecessary." L. J. W., S. D.
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"Used 68 gallons of gas on 1250 mile trip (about 18 miles to a gallon) BEFORE USING OVRHAUL. Made same trip AFTER and used only 48 gallons (which is 26 miles to the gallon)." P. D. C., Ind.
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(Continued from page 108)

middle of the small pyramid of red embers, with their little wicks of fire. Ashes and live coals geysered savagely into Luke Igo's face, as the outlaw hoisted himself awkwardly.

Tom's hand had already snatched up Mike's gun. His forefinger hit through the trigger-guard, as he mentally damned a lawman so stupid as to have a trigger at all on anything so vital to health as a single-action six-shooter.

Darkness flooded down, darkness sprinkled with fading coals and now lashed by gun-flame, ripping out behind the ear-splitting detonations of .45's. Lead spat against rock, while wicked fragments whispered away; lead slugged human flesh, writing off in red the last grim balance on the ledger of life.

Three against two, they were. Dutch Wall, Luke Igo and Pete Hernandez, nailed fairly at their own murder game by the sons of Allison.

The jolting gun in the hand of Tom laid down a barrage that counted its roaring blasts in split-second frequency; almost faster than a man could count. *One-two-three!* Like that! The storm-flung shots of a gunfighter born.

And then, though his brain was clear, Tom Allison no longer possessed the power of coordination. His steel-like fingers refused command. His gun dipped its hot muzzle; the butt of the big Colt slipped slowly from his blood-drenched grip. His fight was done.

Never had the stumbling bulk of Luke Igo attained full balance. His gun thundered wildly twice before the outlaw, mortally hit, sagged to earth.

Pete Hernandez fired once; then fell, as a blunt-nosed bullet from the gun of Tom Allison drilled him clean.

Dutch Wall's gun-muzzle flashed twice at the stabs of fire across the cave. And then, in stern justice, the .45 in the hand of Mike Allison pronounced his eternal sentence.

The booming reverberations faded. There was then only the nervous stamp of hoofs in a deeper recess of the cave, and the acrid fumes of powder smoke and wood blending. Here and there the shroud of blackness was specked by a dull-glowing ember. Once a spasmodic movement, a sodden cough; then silence.

When at last he could stand the dread stillness no longer, Mike Allison spoke.

"Tom," he said. "Tommy!"

It seemed a long time before a voice answered, a voice from far away, close to the end of things.

"It's—all right—Mike—"

Across the gulf of the cavern's night, Mike Allison felt his way, and dropped to his knees then beside Tom. He raised the other partly, held him tight in his arms.

"Tommy!" Mike choked. "Tommy, yuh oughta been wearin' the star, an' not me."

"Aw, we was—both wearin' it. It took plenty guts—comin' here—alone." Tom fought for breath. "Thanks—Mike. It was better—jest you an' me." His fingers found his brother's hand and clenched it tight. "I'm sorry fer—the trouble—I made yuh. Ask Jan to forgive me. . . . She'll make yuh—a grand wife—"

"Listen, Tommy!" Mike shook the other gently. "Listen! You're goin' to be all right. Yuh ain't quittin' now, just when things is comin' out right. I'll fix it with Jan an' old Matt Cressy an' all of 'em. I'll tell 'em that it wa'n't me, but you, that got these

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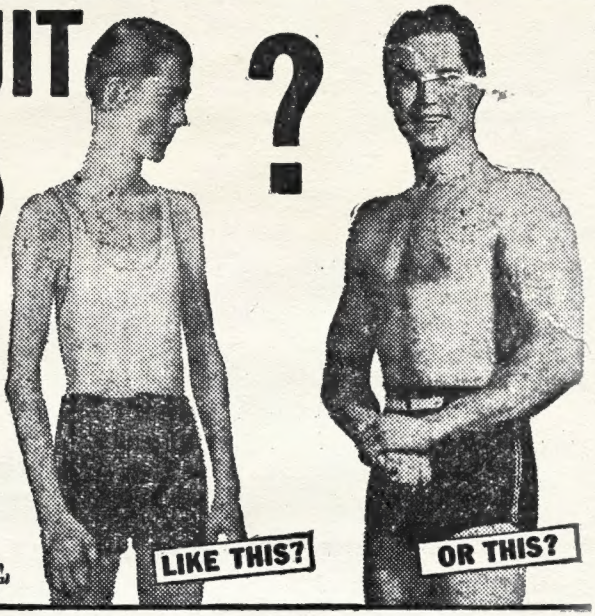

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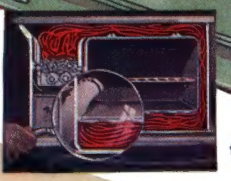

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